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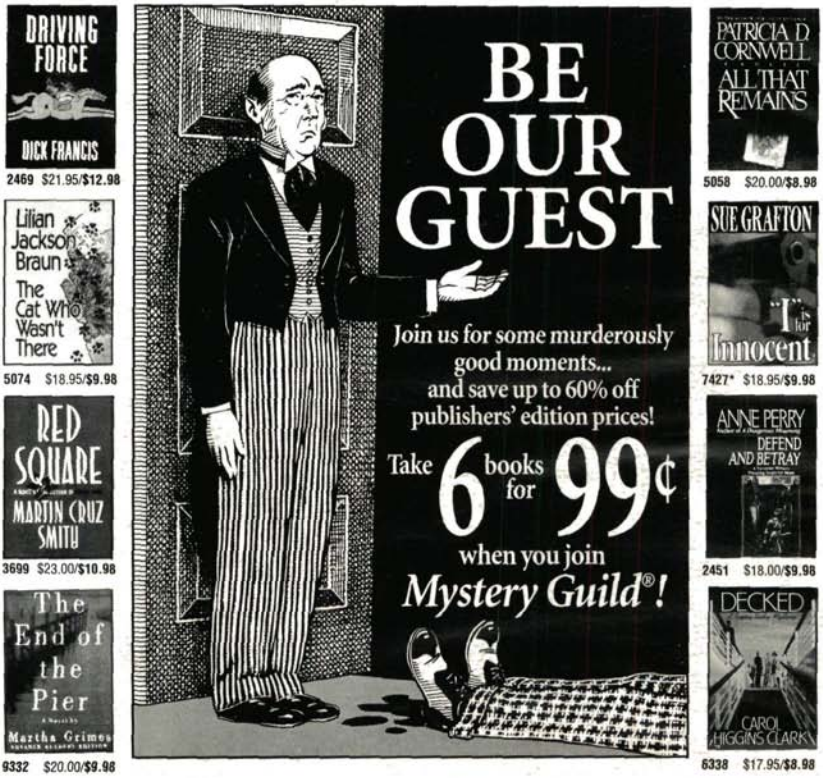

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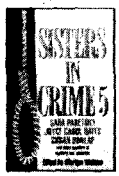

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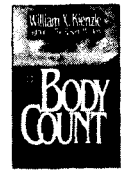

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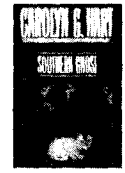

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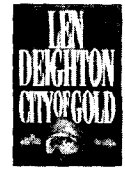

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a *NEW* Inspector Wexford story by

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Considered by many to be the best living crime novelist, Ruth Rendell is also one of the most productive. 1992 saw new books published under both her own name (Kissing the Gunner's Daughter—*Mysterious Press) and her pseudonym, Barbara Vine* (King Solomon's Carpet—*Harmony Books). A new Barbara Vine novel is due out this spring. Happily, she also finds time to write stories such as the following, which is so complex in structure as to be almost a miniature novel. . . .*

THE MOUSE IN THE CORNER

by RUTH RENDELL

"I think you know who killed your stepfather," said Wexford.

It was a throwaway line, uttered on parting and over his shoulder as he reached the door. A swift exit was, however, impossible. He had to bend almost double. The girl he spoke to was a small woman, the boyfriend she lived with no more than five foot six. Life in the caravan, he thought, would otherwise have been insupportable.

Stuck in the doorway, he said when she made no reply, "You won't mind if I come back in a day or two and we'll have another talk. All the same if I do, isn't it?

"You don't have to talk to me, Miss Heddon. It's open to you to say no." It would all have been more dignified if he could have stood up and faced her, but Wexford wasn't much concerned with dignity. He spoke rather gravely but with gentleness. "But if you've no objection we'll continue this conversation on Monday. I've a feeling you know a lot more than you've told me."

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She said it, one of those phrases that invariably means its opposite. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's unworthy of someone of your intelligence," he said and he had meant it.

He opened the door and climbed out. She followed him and stood there, holding the door, a pretty young woman of twenty who looked even younger than her age because her blond hair was waist-length and her white blouse schoolgirlish.

"Monday, then," Wexford said. "Shall we say three-ish?"

"Suit yourself." With one of her flashes of humour, she said, "You must feel like a Rottweiler in a rabbit hutch in here."

He smiled. "You may be right. It's true my bite is worse than my bark."

Possibly digesting this, she closed the door without another word. He picked his way back to the car, where Donaldson waited at the wheel. A path of cinders made a just usable track across the corner of a muddy field. In the cold haze the shape of a cottage converted from a railway carriage could just be seen against a grey tangle of wilderness. Two inches of rain had fallen in the week since Tom Peterlee's death and the sky of massive grey cumulus was loaded with more.

"Go by way of Feverel's, will you, Steve?" said Wexford. "I don't want to stop, just take a look."

The farm shop remained closed, though a wooden board offering for sale apples, pears, plums, and walnuts for pickling still stood by the gate. Wexford told Donaldson to stop the car and park for a few moments. Let Heather Peterlee see him. That sort of thing did no harm. He looked, for the dozenth time, at the shack that had been a shop, the huddle of wooden buildings, the house itself, and the inevitable caravan.

The house was a Victorian building, rendered in a pale stone colour that the rain had turned to khaki. The shallow roof was of dull grey slate. Some ten yards of bleak ground, part gravel and part scrubby grass, separated the house from the shop. In between and a little distance behind, the caravan stood on a concrete slab, and beyond it stretched the market gardens.

The shop, its double doors closed and padlocked, its windows boarded up, seemed a dilapidated hut. A sheet of the corrugated iron that roofed it had come loose and clanged up and down rhythmically in the increasing wind. It was a dreary place. No visitor would have difficulty in believing a man had been clubbed to death there.

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As Donaldson started the engine a black spaniel came out from the back of the house and began barking inside the gate. Wexford had felt its teeth through his jacket sleeve, though blood had not been drawn.

"That the dog, is it, sir?"

They all knew the story, even those only remotely involved. Wexford confirmed that this indeed was the dog, this was Scamp.

Wexford spared a glance for the neighbours. Joseph Peterlee had a plant hire business and a customer was in the act of returning a mechanical digger. In conversation with her husband and the digger driver on the concrete entrance, an area much cracked, pitted, and now puddled, was Mrs. Monica Peterlee in her unvarying uniform of rubber boots and floral cross-over overall. And those are the characters in this drama, he thought, with the exception of one who (to paraphrase Kipling) has gone to the husband of her bosom the same as she ought to go, and one who has gone heaven only knows where.

Why was he so sure Arlene Heddon had the answer? Mike Burden, his second-in-command at Kingsmarkham CID, said with contempt that at any rate she was more attractive than the wife and the widow. With his usual distaste for those whose lives failed to approximate fairly closely to his own, he spoke scathingly of "the Peterlee girl" as if having no job and no proper roof over one's head directly conduced to homicide.

"Her name," Wexford said rather dourly, "is Heddon. It was her father's name. Heather Peterlee, if you remember, was a Mrs. Heddon before she remarried." He added, wondering as he did so why he bothered to indulge Burden's absurd prejudices, "A widow, incidentally."

Quick as a flash, Burden came back with, "What did her first husband die of?"

"Oh God, Mike, some bone disease. We went into all that. But back to Arlene Heddon, she's a very intelligent young woman, you know."

"No, I don't know. You must be joking. Intelligent girls don't live on benefit in caravans with unemployed welders."

"What a snob you are."

"*Married* welders. I'm not just a snob, I'm a moralist. Intelligent girls do well at school, go on to further education, get suitable well-paid jobs, and buy themselves homes on mortgages."

"Somehow and somewhere along the line Arlene Heddon missed out on that. In any case, I didn't say she was academically inclined. She's sharp, she's clever, she's got a good brain."

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"And her mother, the two-times widow, is she the genius Arlene inherited her IQ from?"

This was neither the time nor the place to be discussing the murder, Wexford's house on a Saturday evening, but Burden had come round for a drink and whatever the topic of conversation, things had a way of coming back to the Peterlees. Wexford suggested they go over the sequence of events again. Dora, his wife, was present, but sitting on the window seat, reading tranquilly.

"You can set me right on the details," Wexford began, "but I think you'll agree it was broadly like this. On Thursday, October tenth, Heather Peterlee opened the farm shop at Feverel's as usual at nine in the morning. Heather had her sister-in-law Mrs. Monica Peterlee to help her, again as usual. Her husband, Tom, was working outside, and at lunchtime he brought up to the shop by tractor the vegetables he had lifted and picked during the morning.

"They ate their midday meal in the shop, keeping it open, and at three or thereabouts Joseph Peterlee arrived in his car to fetch his wife and take her shopping in Kingsmarkham. Tom and Heather served in the shop until closing time at five, when they returned to the house and Heather began preparing a meal. Tom had brought in the shop's takings with him, which he intended to put in the safe, but in the meantime he left the notes on the kitchen dresser that faces the outside door. The sum was about three hundred and sixty pounds. He put the money on the dresser shelf and placed on top of it his camera in its case, presumably to stop it blowing about when the door was opened. He then went to the caravan to discuss raising the rent with Carol Fox, who had been living there since the summer."

"Tom Peterlee was killed for three hundred and sixty pounds," said Burden.

"No, but various people would like us to think he was. It's a problem even guessing why he was killed. Everyone seems to have liked him. We have had . . ." Wexford hesitated, "golden opinions from all sorts of people. He was something of a paragon by all accounts, an ideal husband, good, kind, undeniably handsome. He was even handsome on the slab—forgive me, Dora.

"But I'll go on. They ate their meal at five-thirty. During the course of it, according to her statement, Tom said to his wife that they had fixed up the matter of the rent amicably. Carol wanted to stay on and understood the rent she was paying was inadequate . . ."

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Dora interrupted him. "Is that the woman who'd left her husband and Heather Peterlee said she could have their caravan because she'd nowhere to live?"

"A friend of Heather's from way back, apparently. According to Heather, she told Tom she'd be round in an hour to accompany her on a dog walk. Heather always took the dog out after supper and Carol had got into the habit of going with her. Heather washed up their dishes and Tom dried. As I've said, he was an ideal husband. At some point he went out to the woodshed and fetched in a basket of logs to feed the wood-burning stoves, of which there was one in the kitchen and another in the living room.

"Carol knocked on the door and came into the kitchen at twenty past six. It wasn't raining but it looked like rain and Carol was wearing only a cardigan. Heather suggested she put on one of the rainproof jackets hanging behind the back door and Carol took a fawn-coloured one."

"Strange, wasn't it," Burden put in, "that she didn't fetch a coat of her own from the caravan? Especially a woman like that. Very conscious of her appearance, I'd say. But perhaps she wouldn't care, out on her own with another woman. It was a dull evening and they weren't likely to meet anyone."

Dora gave him a look, enigmatic, half-smiling, but said nothing. Her husband went on, "If you remember, when the caravan was searched as the house was, the fact was remarked on that Carol Fox had no raincoat among her clothes. She has said, and Heather has confirmed it, that she always used one of Heather's. They took the dog and went for a walk through the Feverel's land, across the meadows by the public footpath, and down to the river. It was sometime between six-twenty and six-thirty that they left. It was still light and would be for another half-hour. What Tom did in their absence we don't know and probably never shall know, except that putting that money into the safe wasn't among his activities.

"At about ten to seven Arlene Heddon arrived at Feverel's, brought in her boyfriend's van." Wexford raised an eyebrow at Burden. "The unemployed, married welder, Gary Wyatt. Arlene and Gary have no phone and Arlene got the message from grandma, on whose land she lives. She's not really her grandmother, of course, but she calls her grandma."

"The old witch," said Dora. "That's what people call her. She's well known."

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"I don't think she's as old as she looks and she's definitely not a witch, though she cultivates that appearance. To be the mother of Joseph and Tom she need be no more than sixty-five, and I daresay she's not. The message Arlene got from Mrs. Peterlee senior was that Mum had finished her jumper and if she wanted it for the Friday, could she come and pick it up? The time suggested was about eight. Grandma said she'd drive Arlene herself on account of she was going to her Conservative Association meeting in Kingsmarkham—I kid you not, Dora—but she said, no, Gary and she would still be eating their tea. Gary would take her in the van a bit later on.

"In fact, Gary wanted to go out at half-past six. He dropped her off at Feverel's, thus getting her there more than an hour earlier than her mother had suggested, and went on to have a drink with his pals in the Red Rose at Edenwick. Not that anyone has confirmed this. Neither the licensee nor the girl behind the bar remembers him being there. Which is in direct contrast to the evidence of the old witch's witnesses. Strange as her presence there might seem, every Tory in Kingsmarkham seems to remember her in the Seminar Room of the Olive and Dove Hotel that night. Not until seven-thirty, however, when the meeting started. Where had she been in that lost hour and a half?

"Gary promised to come back for Arlene in an hour. Arlene went round the back of the house and entered by the kitchen door, which was unlocked. As a daughter of the house, she didn't knock or call out, but walked straight in.

"There, in the kitchen, on the floor, she found the body of her stepfather, Tom Peterlee, lying face downwards, with a wound in the back of the head. She knelt down and touched his face. It was still faintly warm. She knew there was a phone in the sitting room but, fearing whoever had done this might still be in the house, she didn't go in there but ran back outside in the hope Gary had not yet gone. When she saw that he had, she ran the hundred yards or so to Mr. and Mrs. Joe Peterlee's, where she used their phone and dialed 999.

"Joe Peterlee was out, according to his wife. Arlene—all this is Arlene's evidence, partly confirmed by Monica Peterlee—Arlene asked her to come back with her and wait for the police but she said she was too frightened to do that, so Arlene went back alone. Within a very few minutes—it was now five past seven—her mother and

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Carol Fox returned from their walk with the dog. She was waiting outside the back door.

"She prepared them for what they would see and Heather cried out, pushed open the door, and rushed into the kitchen. She threw herself on the body, and when Arlene and Carol pulled her off and lifted her up, she began banging her head and face against the kitchen wall."

Burden nodded. "These two—what do we call them? Hysterical acts? Manifestations of grief?—account for the blood on the front of her jacket and the extensive bruising to her face. Or at least are possible explanations for them."

"The police came and everyone was questioned on the spot. Of course no one had seen any suspicious characters hanging about Feverel's. No one ever has. Joe Peterlee has never been able to give a satisfactory account of his movements between six-twenty and six-fifty. Nor have Gary Wyatt and Grandma Peterlee.

"The money was gone. There was no weapon. No prints, other than those of Tom, Heather, Carol Fox, and Arlene, were found. The pathologist says Tom died between six-fifteen and seven-fifteen, a time which can be much narrowed down if Arlene is to be believed. Remember, she says he felt warm when she touched him at six-fifty.

"I think she's lying. I think she's lying all along the line, she's protecting someone, and that's why I'm going to keep on talking to her until I find out who. Grandma or her boyfriend or her Uncle Joe—or her mother."

Dora wrinkled up her nose. "Isn't it a bit distasteful, Reg, getting a girl to betray her own mother? It's like the KGB."

"And we know what happened to them," said Burden.

Wexford smiled. "I may only be getting her to betray her step-aunt by marriage, or isn't that allowed either?"

Burden left them at about ten to ten. He was on foot, for he and Wexford lived less than a mile apart. His route home was to take him past the big new shopping mall, the York Crest Centre. He deplored the name and the place, all a far cry from what Kingsmarkham had been when first he came.

Then there was life in the town at night, people entering or emerging from pubs and restaurants, cinema visitors, walkers strolling, in those days before the ubiquitous car. Television, the effects of recession, and the fear of street violence had all combined to keep the townsfolk indoors and the place was deserted. It was silent, empty but brightly lit, and therefore slightly uncanny.

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His footfalls made a faint hollow echo; he saw his solitary figure reflected in gleaming shop windows. Not a soul passed him as he entered York Street, not a single being waited on a corner or at the bus stop. He turned into the alley that ran along the side of the York Crest Centre, to cut a furlong or so off his journey.

Into his silent speculation burst the raiders. It took him about thirty seconds to realise what this was. He had seen it on television but thought it confined to the north. A ram raid. That was what someone had named this kind of heist. The Land Rover first, turning on the paved court, reversing at the highest speed it could make into the huge glass double doors that shut off the centre by night. The noise of crashing glass was enormous, like a bomb.

It vanished inside, followed by two cars, a Volvo and a Volvo Estate, rattling over the broken glass, the wreckage of the doors. He didn't wait to see what happened. He had his cell-phone in his hand and switched on before the second car's taillights had disappeared. "No service" came up on its screen and "No service" when he shook it and pulled the aerial out. It had gone wrong. Never before had that happened, but it had to happen tonight when he was in the right place at the right time.

Burden raced down the alley to the phones on the post office wall, four of them under plastic hoods. The first he tried had been vandalised, the second worked. If he could get them there within five minutes, within ten even . . . He pounded back, remembered it would be advisable not to be heard, and crept the rest of the way. They were leaving, the Land Rover—stolen of course—with all its glass shattered, the two Volvos hard on its rear, and were gone God knew where by the time the Mid-Sussex Constabulary cars arrived.

The purpose of the raid had been to remove as much electronic equipment as the thieves could shift in five minutes from Nixon's in the Centre. It had been a tremendous haul and had probably taken twelve men to accomplish it.

The phone on the post office wall was repaired and on the following day vandalised again, along with all the others in the row. That was on a Monday, the date of Wexford's second conversation with Arlene Heddon. He went along to the caravan on old Mrs. Peterlee's land in the late afternoon. Arlene sometimes had a cleaning job but she was always in during the afternoons. He tapped on the door and she called out to him to come in.

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The television was on and she was watching, lounging on the seat that ran the length of the opposite wall. She looked so relaxed, even somnolent, that Wexford thought she would switch off by means of the channel changer which lay on top of the partition that divided living/bedroom from kitchen, but she got up and pressed the switch. They faced each other, and this time she seemed anxious to talk. He began to take her through a series of new inquiries and all the old ones.

He noticed, then, that what she said differed very slightly from what she had said the first time, if in minor details. Her mother had not thrown herself on the body but knelt down and cradled the dead man's head in her arms. It was on one of the counters, not against the wall, that Heather had beaten her head.

The dog had howled at the sight of its dead master. The first time she said she thought she had heard a noise upstairs when first she arrived. This time she said she denied it, all had been silent. She had not noticed if the money was there or not when she first arrived. Now she said the money was there with the camera on top of the notes. When she came back from making her phone call she had not gone back into the house but had waited outside for her mother to return. That was what she said the first time. Now she said she had gone briefly into the kitchen once more. The camera was there but the money gone.

Wexford pointed out these discrepancies in a casual way. She made no comment. He asked, with apparent indifference, "Just as a matter of interest, how did you know your mother was out with the dog?"

"The dog wasn't there and she wasn't."

"You were afraid to use the phone in the house in case your stepfather's killer might still be there. You never considered the possibility that your mother might have been dead in some other part of the house? That Carol Fox might have taken the dog out on her own, as perhaps she sometimes did?"

"I didn't know Carol very well," said Arlene Heddon.

It was hardly an answer. "But she was a close friend of your mother's, an old friend, wasn't she? You might say your mother offered her sanctuary when she left her husband. That's the action of a close friend, isn't it?"

"I haven't lived at home since I was seventeen. I don't know all the friends my mother's got. I didn't know whether Carol took the dog out or what. Tom sometimes took him out and my mother did.

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I never heard of Carol going with my mother, but I wouldn't. I wasn't interested in Carol."

"Yet you waited for them both to come back from their walk, Miss Heddon?"

"I waited for my mother," she said.

Wexford left her, promising to come back for another talk on Thursday. Grandma was nowhere to be seen, but as he approached his car hers swept in, bumping over the rough ground, lurching through a trough or two, skidding with a scream of brakes on the ice, and, describing a swift half-circle round the railway carriage, juddering to a stop. Florrie Peterlee, getting on for seventy and looking eighty, drove like an eighteen-year-old madbrain at the wheel of his first jalopy.

She gave the impression of clawing her way out. Her white hair was as long and straight as Arlene's and she was always dressed in trailing black that sometimes had a curiously fashionable look. On a teenager it would have been trendy. She had a hooky nose and prominent chin, and bright black eyes. So far she had shown no grief whatever at the death of her son.

"You're too old for her," said the old witch.

"Too old for what?" said Wexford, refusing to be out-faced.

"Ooh, hard at him! That's a nice question to ask a senior citizen. Mind I don't put a spell on you. Why don't you leave her alone, poor lamb."

"She's going to tell me who killed your son Tom."

"Get away. She don't know. Maybe I did." She stared at him with a bold defiance. "I all but killed his dad once. I said, you've knocked me about once too often, Arthur Peterlee, and I picked up the kitchen knife and come at him with it. I won't say he never touched me again, human nature never worked that way, but he dropped dead with his heart soon after, poor old sod. I was so glad to see the back of him I danced on his grave. People say that, I know, it's just a way of talking, but me, I really did it. Went up the cemetery with a half-bottle of gin and danced on the bugger's grave."

Wexford could see her, hair flying, black draperies blowing, the bottle in one hand, her wrinkled face dabbled with gin, dancing under the rugged ilexes and the yew tree's shade. He put up his eyebrows. Before she had more chances to shock him, or try to, he asked her if she had thought any more about telling him where she had been in that lost hour on the evening of her son's death.

"You'd be surprised."

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She said it, not as a figure of speech, but as a genuine undertaking that she could astonish him. He had no doubt she could. She grinned, showing even white teeth, not dentures. The thought came to him that if she had a good bath, put her copious hair up, and dressed in something more appropriate for a rural matriarch, she might look rather wonderful. He wasn't too worried about her alibi or lack of one, for he doubted if she had the strength to wield the "blunt instrument" that had killed Tom Peterlee.

He was very certain he knew what that instrument was and what had become of it. Arriving at Feverel's within the hour, he had seen the wood splinters in Tom Peterlee's head wound before the pathologist arrived. With a sinking heart he had taken in the implications of a basket full of logs just inside the back door and the big wood-burning stove in an embrasure of the wall facing the door into the house. They would never find the weapon. Without being able to prove it, he knew from the first that it had been an iron-hard log of oak, maybe a foot long and three or four inches in diameter, a log used to strike again and again, then pushed in among the blazing embers in that stove.

He had even looked. The stove had been allowed to go out. Could you imagine anyone making up the fire at a time like that? A pale grey powdery dust glowed red still in one patch at the heart of it and as he watched, died. Later on, he had those ashes analysed. All the time he was up there the dog howled. Someone shut it up in a distant room, but its long-drawn-out cries pursued him up the road on his way to see Joseph and Monica Peterlee.

He remembered wondering, not relevantly, if she dressed like that to sit down at table, to watch television. At nine o'clock at night she was still in her cross-over overall, her black wellies. Her husband was a bigger and heavier version of his brother, three or four years older, his hair iron-grey where Tom's had been brown, his belly fat and slack where Tom's had been flat. They alibied each other, uselessly, and Joe had no alibi for the relevant time. He had been out shooting rabbits, he said, producing his shotgun and shotgun licence.

"They done Tom in for the money," he told Wexford sagely. He spoke as if without his proffered information, such a solution would never have occurred to the police. "I told him. I said to him time and again, I said, you don't want to leave that laying about, not even for an hour, not even in daylight. What you got a safe for if you don't use it? I said that, didn't I, girl?"

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His wife confirmed that he had indeed said it. Over and over. Wexford had the impression she would have confirmed anything he said. For peace, for a quiet life. It was two days later that, interviewing them again, he asked about the relationship between Tom and Heather Peterlee.

"They was a very happy couple," Joe said. "Never a cross word in all the ten years they was married."

Wexford, later, wondered what Dora would have said if he had made such a remark about relatives of his. Or Burden's wife Jenny if he had. Something dry, surely. There would have been some quick intervention, some, "Oh, come on, how would you know?" But Monica said nothing. She smiled nervously. Her husband looked at her and she stopped smiling.

The ram raiders were expected to have another go the following Saturday night. Instead they came on Friday, late shopping night at Stowerton Brook Buyers' Heaven, less than an hour after the shops closed. Another stolen Land Rover burst through the entrance doors, followed by a stolen Range Rover and a BMW. This time the haul was from Electronic World but was similar to that taken the previous time. The men in those three vehicles got away with an astonishing £35,000 worth of equipment.

This time Burden had not been nearby, on his way home. No one had, since the Stowerton Brook industrial site where Buyers' Heaven was lay totally deserted by night, emptier by far than Kingsmarkham town centre. The two guard dogs that kept watch over the neighbouring builders' supplies yard had been destroyed a month before in the purge on dangerous breeds.

Burden had been five miles away, talking to Carol Fox and her husband Raymond. To Burden, who never much noticed any woman's appearance but his wife's, she was simply rather above average good-looking. In her mid-thirties, ten years younger than Heather, she was brightly dressed and vivacious. It was Wexford who described her as one of that group or category that seems to have more natural colour than most women, with her pure red hair, glowing luminous skin, ivory and pink, and her eyes of gentian blue. He said nothing about the unnatural colour that decorated Mrs. Fox's lips, nails, and eyelids to excess. Burden assessed her as "just a cockney with an awful voice." Privately, he thought of her as common. She was loud and coarse, a strange friend for the quiet, reserved, and mousy Heather.

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The husband she had returned to after a six-month separation was thin and toothy with hag-ridden eyes, some sort of salesman. He seemed proud of her and exaggeratedly pleased to have her back. On that particular evening, the case not much more than a week old, he was anxious to assure Burden and anyone else who would listen that his and his wife's parting had been no more than a "trial," an experimental living apart to refresh their relationship. They were together again now for good. Their separation hadn't been a success but a source of misery to both of them.

Carol said nothing. Asked by Burden to go over with him once more the events of 10 October, she reaffirmed six-twenty as the time she and Heather had gone out. Yes, there had been a basket of logs just inside the back door. She hadn't seen any money on the counter or the dresser. Tom had been drying dishes when she came in. He was alive and well when they left, putting the dishes away in the cupboard.

"I should be so lucky," said Carol, with a not very affectionate glance at her husband.

"Did you like Tom Peterlee, Mrs. Fox?"

Was it his imagination or had Raymond Fox's expression changed minutely? It would be too much to say that he had winced. Burden repeated his question.

"He was always pleasant," she said. "I never saw much of him."

The results came from the lab, disclosing that a piece of animal bone had been among the stove ashes. Burden had found out, that first evening, what the Peterlees had had for their evening meal: lamb chops with potatoes and cabbage Tom had grown himself. The remains were put into the bin for the compost heap, never into the stove. Bones, cooked or otherwise, the Peterlees weren't particular, were put on the back doorstep for the dog.

What had become of the missing money? They searched the house a second time, observing the empty safe, the absence of any jewellery, the absence of books, any kind of reading matter, or any sign of the generally accepted contributions to gracious living.

Heather Peterlee shut herself up in the house and when approached, said nothing. Questioned, she stared dumbly and remained dumb. Everyone explained her silence as due to her grief. Wexford, without much hope of anything coming of it, asked to remove the film from the camera that had weighted down the missing notes. She shrugged, muttered that he could have it, he was

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welcome, and turned her face to the wall. But when he came to look, he found no film in the camera.

Burden said Wexford's continued visits to Arlene Heddon were an obsession, the chief constable that they were a waste of time. Since his second visit she had given precisely the same answers to all the questions he asked—the same, that is, as on that second occasion. He wondered how she did it. Either it was the transparent truth or she had total recall. In that case, why did it differ from what she had said the first time he questioned her? Now all was perfect consistency.

If she made a personal comment there might be something new, but she rarely did. Every time he referred to Tom Peterlee as her stepfather she corrected him by saying, "I called him Tom," and if he spoke of Joseph and Monica as her uncle and aunt, she told him they weren't her uncle and aunt. Carol Fox was her mother's great friend: Heather had known her for years, but she, Arlene, knew Carol scarcely at all.

"I never heard of Carol walking the dog with my mother, but I wouldn't. I wasn't interested in Carol."

Sometimes Gary Wyatt was there. When Wexford came he always left. He always had a muttered excuse about having to see someone about something and being late already. One Monday—it was usually Mondays and Thursdays that Wexford went to the caravan—he asked Gary to wait a moment. Had he thought any more about giving details of where he was between six forty-five and seven-thirty that evening? Gary hadn't. He had been in the pub, the Red Rose at Edenwick.

"No one remembers seeing you."

"That's their problem."

"It may become yours, Gary. You didn't like Tom Peterlee, did you? Isn't it a fact that Tom refused to let you and Arlene have the caravan Mrs. Fox lived in because you'd left your wife and children?"

"That was the pot calling the kettle," said Gary.

"And what does that mean?"

Nothing, they said. It meant nothing. He hadn't been referring to Tom. A small smile crossed Arlene's face and was gone. Gary went out to see someone about something, an appointment for which he was already late, and Wexford began asking about Heather's behaviour when she came home after her walk.

"She didn't throw herself at him," Arlene said glibly, without, it seemed, a vestige of feeling. "She knelt down and sort of held his

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head and cuddled it. She got his blood on her. Carol and me, we made her get up and then she started banging her face on that counter."

It was the same as last time, always the same.

There had been no appeals to the public for witnesses to come forward. Witnesses to what? Heather Peterlee's alibi was supplied by Carol Fox and Wexford couldn't see why she should have lied or the two of them have been in cahoots. Friend she might be, but not such a friend as to perjure herself to save a woman who had motivelessly murdered an ideal husband.

He wondered about the bone fragment. But they had a dog. It was hardly too far-fetched to imagine a dog's bone getting in among the logs for the stove. Awkward, yes, but awkward inexplicable things do happen. It was still hard for him to accept that Arlene had simply taken it for granted her mother was out walking the dog with Carol Fox when she scarcely seemed to know that Carol lived there. And he had never really been able to swallow that business about Heather banging her face against the counter. Carol had only said, "Oh yes, she did," and Heather herself put her hands over her mouth and turned her face to the wall.

Then a curious thing happened that began to change everything. An elderly man who had been a regular customer at the farm shop asked to speak to Wexford. He was a widower who shopped and cooked for himself, living on the state pension and a pension from the Mid-Sussex Water Authority.

Frank Waterton began by apologising, he was sure it was nothing, he shouldn't really be troubling Wexford, but this was a matter which had haunted him. He had always meant to do something about it, though he was never sure what. That was why he had, in the event, done nothing.

"What is it, Mr. Waterton? Why not tell me and I'll decide if it's nothing." The old man looked at him almost wistfully. "No one will blame you if it's nothing. You'll still have been public-spirited and done your duty."

Wexford didn't even know then that it was connected with the Peterlee case. Because he was due to pay one of his twice-weekly calls on Arlene Heddon, he was impatient and did his best not to let his impatience show.

"It's to do with what I noticed once or twice when I went shopping for my bits and pieces at Feverel's," he said and then Wexford ceased

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to feel exasperated or to worry about getting to Arlene on time. "It must have been back in June the first time, I know it was June on account of the strawberries were in. I can see her now looking through the strawberries to get me a nice punnet and when she lifted her face up—well, I was shocked. I was really shocked. She was bruised like someone had been knocking her about. She'd a black eye and a cut on her cheek. I said, you've been in the wars, Mrs. Peterlee, and she said she'd had a fall and hit herself on the sink."

"You say that was the first time?"

"That's right. I sort of half-believed her when she said that but not the next time. Not when I went in there again when the Cox's apples first came in—must have been late September—and her face was black and blue all over again. And she'd got her wrist strapped up—well, bandaged. I didn't comment, not that time. I reckoned it wouldn't be—well, tactful.

"I just thought I ought to come and tell someone. It's been preying on my mind ever since I heard about Tom Peterlee getting done in. I sort of hesitated and hemmed and hawed. If it had been *her* found killed I'd have been in like a shot, I can tell you."

He made it to Arlene's only a quarter of an hour late. Because it fascinated him, hearing her give all those same answers, parrotlike, except that the voice this parrot mimicked was her own, he asked her all the same things over again. The question about her mother's bruised face he left till last, to have the effect of a bombshell.

First of all, he got the same stuff. "She knelt down and took hold of his head and sort of cuddled it. That's how she got his blood on her. Me and Carol pulled her off him and lifted her up and she started banging her face on the counter."

"Was she banging her face on the counter in June, Miss Heddon? Was she doing the same thing in September? And how about her bandaged wrist?"

Arlene Heddon didn't know. She looked him straight in the eye, both her eyes into both his, and said she didn't know.

"I never saw her wrist bandaged."

He turned deliberately from her hypnotic gaze and looked round the caravan. They had acquired a microwave since he was last there. An electric jug kettle had replaced the old chrome one. Presents from Grandma? The old witch was reputed to be well-off. It was said that none of the money she had made from selling off acres of her land in building lots had found its way into her sons' pockets. He

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had noticed a new car parked outside the railway-carriage cottage and wouldn't have been surprised to learn that she replaced hers every couple of years.

"It'll be Tuesday next week, not Monday, Miss Heddon," he said as he left.

"Suit yourself."

"Gary found himself a job yet?"

"What job? You must be joking."

"Perhaps I am. Perhaps there's something hilarious in the idea of either of you working. I mean, have you ever given it a thought? Earning your living is what I'm talking about."

She shut the door hard between them.

After that, inquiries among the people who had known them elicited plenty of descriptions of Mrs. Peterlee's visible injuries. Regular customers at the farm shop remembered her bandaged arm. One spoke of a black eye so bad that it had closed up and on the following day Heather Peterlee had covered it with a shade. She explained a scab on her upper lip as a cold sore but the customer to whom she had told this story hadn't believed her.

The myth of the ideal husband was fading. Only the Peterlees themselves continued to support it and Monica Peterlee, when Burden asked her about it, seemed stricken dumb with fear. It was as if he had put his finger on the sorest part of a trauma and reawakened everything that caused the wound.

"I don't want to talk about it. You can't make me. I don't want to know."

Joseph treated the suggestion as a monstrous calumny on his dead brother. He blustered, "You want to be very careful what you're insinuating. Tom's dead and he can't defend himself, so you lot think you can say anything. The police aren't gods anymore, you want to remember that. There's not an evening goes by when you don't see it on the telly, another lot of coppers up in court for making things up they'd writ down and saying things what never happened."

His wife was looking at him the way a mouse in a corner looks at a cat that has temporarily mislaid it. Burden wasn't going to question Heather. They left her severely alone as they began to build up a case against her.

The day after the third ram raid—this time on the Kingsbrook Centre itself in the middle of Kingsmarkham—Wexford was back in

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Arlene Heddon's caravan and Arlene was saying, "I never saw her wrist bandaged."

"Miss Heddon, you know your stepfather repeatedly assaulted your mother. He knocked her about, gave her black eyes, cut her cheek. His brother Joseph doubtless hands out the same treatment to his wife. What have you got to gain by pretending you knew nothing about it?"

"She knelt on the floor and lifted up his head and sort of cuddled it. That's how she got blood on her. Me and Carol sort of pulled her off him and then she started banging—"

Wexford stopped her. "No. She got those bruises because Tom hit her in the face. I don't know why. Do you know why? Maybe it was over money, the shop takings he left on the dresser. Or maybe she'd protested about him asking for more rent from Carol Fox. If your mother argued with him he reacted by hitting her. That was his way."

"If you say so."

"No, Miss Heddon. It's not what I say, it's what you say."

He waited for her to rejoin with, "I never saw her wrist bandaged," but she lifted her eyes and he could have sworn there was amusement in them, a flash of it that came and went. She astounded him by what she said. It was the last thing he expected. She fidgeted for a moment or two with the channel changer on the divider between them, lifted her eyes, and said slowly, "Carol Fox was Tom's girlfriend."

He digested this, saw fleetingly a host of possible implications, then said, "What, precisely, do you mean by that term?"

She was almost contemptuous. "What everyone means. His girlfriend. His lover. What me and Gary are."

"Not much point in denying it, is there?" said Carol Fox.

"I'm surprised you didn't give us this piece of information, Mr. Fox," Wexford said.

When her husband said nothing, Carol broke in impatiently. "Oh, he's ashamed. Thinks it's a reflection on his manhood or whatever. I told him, you can't keep a thing like that dark, so why bother?"

"You kept it dark from us deliberately for a month."

She shrugged, unrepentant. "I felt a bit bad about Heather, to be honest with you. It was like Tom said I could live in this caravan on his land. He never said it was right next door. Still, there was another girl he'd had four or five years back he actually brought to

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live in the house. He called her the au pair, as if those Peterlees weren't one generation from Gypsies when all's said and done."

"Then I take it his visit to you that evening had nothing to do with raising the rent?"

The husband got up and left the room. Wexford didn't try to stop him. His presence hadn't much inhibited his wife but his absence freed her further. She smiled just a little. "It's not what you're thinking. We had a drink."

"A bit odd, wasn't it, you going out for a walk with his wife? Or didn't she know? That's pretty hard to believe, Mrs. Fox."

"Of course she knew. She hated me. And I can't say I was too keen on her. That wasn't true about us often going out together. That walk, that night, I fixed it up because I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to tell her I was leaving, it was all over between me and Tom, and I was going back to Ray." She drew in a long breath. "I'll be honest with you, it was a physical thing. The way he looked—well, between you and me, I couldn't get enough of it. Maybe it's all worked out for the best. But the fact is, it'd have been different if Tom'd have said he'd leave her, but he wouldn't and I'd had it."

Wexford said, when he and Burden were out in the car, "I was beginning to see Heather's alibi going down the drain. Her best friend lying for her. Not now. I can't see Tom's girlfriend alibiing the wife she wanted out of the way."

"Well, no. Especially not alibiing the woman who'd killed the man she loved or once had loved. It looks as if we start again."

"Does anyone but Heather have a motive? What was in it for Arlene or Gary Wyatt? The man's own mother's capable of anything her strength allows her, but I don't think her strength would have allowed her this. Joseph had nothing to gain by Tom's death—the farm becomes Heather's—and it's evident all Monica wants is a quiet life. So we're left with the marauder who goes about the countryside murdering smallholders for three hundred and sixty quid."

Next morning an envelope arrived addressed to him. It contained nothing but a photographic film processor's chit which was also a receipt for one pound. The receipt was on paper headed with the name of a pharmacist in the York Crest Centre. Wexford guessed the origin of the film before he had Sergeant Martin collect the processed shots. Arlene, at home to him on Tuesday, was back at her parrot game.

"I haven't lived at home since I was seventeen. I don't know all the friends my mother's got. I didn't know whether Carol took the

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dog out or what. Tom sometimes took him out and my mother did. I never heard of Carol going with my mother, but I wouldn't. I wasn't interested in Carol."

"This is reaching the proportions of a psychosis, Miss Heddon."

She knew what that meant. He didn't have to explain. He could see comprehension in her eyes and her small satisfied smile. Others would have asked when all this was going to stop, when would he leave it alone. Not she. She would give all the same answers to his questions indefinitely, and every few weeks throw in a bombshell, as she had when she told him of Carol Fox's place in the Peterlees' lives. Always supposing, of course, that she had more bombshells to throw.

He knocked on the old witch's door. After rather a long time she came. Wexford wasn't invited in and he could see she already had company. An elderly man with a white beard, but wearing jeans and red leather cowboy boots, was standing by the fireplace pouring wine from a half-empty bottle into two glasses.

She gave him the grin that cracked her face into a thousand wrinkles and showed her remarkable teeth.

"I had half an hour going spare, Mrs. Peterlee, so I thought I'd use it asking you where you were between six and seven-thirty on the evening your son was killed."

She put her head on one side. "I reckoned I'd keep you all guessing."

"And now you're going to tell me," he said patiently.

"Why not?" She turned and shouted over her shoulder at a pitch absurdly loud for the distance, "If that one's finished, Eric, you can go and open another. It's on the kitchen table." Wexford was favoured with a wink. "I was with my boyfriend. *Him*. At his place. I always drop in for a quick one before the meeting." She very nearly made him blush. "A quick *drink*," she said. "You can ask him when he comes back. Rude bunch of buggers you cops are. It's written all over your face what you're thinking. Well, he'd marry me tomorrow if I said the word, but I'm shy, I've been bitten once. He may be nice as pie now and all lovey-dovey but it's another story when they've got the ring on your finger. Don't want another one knocking me to kingdom come when his tea's five minutes late on the table."

"Is that why Tom beat up Heather, because his meal was late?"

If she was taken aback she didn't show it. "Come on, they don't need a reason, not when the drink's in them. It's just you being there and not as strong as them and scared too, that's enough for them.

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You needn't look like that. I don't suppose you do like the sound of it. You want to've been on the receiving end. Okay, Eric, I'm coming."

Now that he no longer suspected her, after he had left her alone for a month, he went to Feverel's and saw Heather Peterlee. It was the night of the third ram raid and they knew it was coming when a Volvo Estate and a Land Rover were reported stolen during the day. But that was still three or four hours off.

Abused women have a look in common. Wexford castigated himself for not having seen it when he first came to the house. It had nothing to do with bruises and not much to do with a cowed beaten way of holding themselves. That washed-out, tired, drained appearance told it all, if you knew what you were looking for.

She was very thin but not with the young vigorous slimness of her daughter or the wiriness of her mother-in-law. Her leanness showed slack muscles in her arms and stringy tendons at her wrists. There were hollows under her cheekbones and her mouth was already sunken. The benefit of weeks without Tom had not yet begun to show. Heather Peterlee had neglected herself and her home, had perhaps spent her time of widowhood in silent brooding here in this ugly dark house with only the spaniel for company.

The dog barked and snarled when Wexford came. To silence it she struck it too brutally across the muzzle. Violence begets violence, he thought. You receive it and store it up and then you transmit it—onto whoever or whatever is feebler than you.

Even now she denied it. Sitting opposite him in a drab cotton dress with a thick knitted cardigan dragged shawl-like around her, she repudiated any suggestion that Tom had been less than good and gentle. As for Carol, yes, it was true Tom had offered her the caravan and not she. Tom had been told by a friend she wanted a place to live. What friend? She didn't know the name. And the "au pair"?

"You've been talking to my daughter."

Wexford admitted that this was indeed the case, though not to what weary extent it was true.

"Arlene imagines things. She's got too much imagination." A spark of vitality made a small change in her when she spoke of her daughter. Her voice became a fraction more animated. "She's brainy, is Arlene, she's a bright one. Wanted to go in for the police, you know."

"I'm sorry?"

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"Get to be a policewoman or whatever they call them now."

"A police officer," said Wexford. "Did she really? What stopped that, then?"

"Took up with that Gary, didn't she?"

It was hardly an answer but Wexford didn't pursue it. He didn't ask about her husband's involvement with Carol Fox either. He had proof of that, not only in Carol's own admission but in the film from Tom Peterlee's camera. All the shots were of Carol, three nudes taken with a flash inside the Feverel's caravan. They were decorous enough, for Carol had been coy in her posing.

Wexford studied the three photographs again that evening. Their setting, not their voluptuous subject, made them pathetic. Sordidness of background, a window with a sagging net curtain, a coat hanging up, a glimpse of an encrusted pot on a hot plate, gave an air of attempts at creating pornography in some makeshift studio.

The identity of the sender of the processor's chit wasn't a problem. He had known that, if not from the moment he took it from its envelope, at least long before forensics matched with an existing set the fingerprints on the paper. He knew who had handed over the counter the film and the pound deposit. It was not even the subject of the shots that predominantly concerned him now. His slight depression vanished and he was suddenly alert. From those pictures he suddenly knew who had killed Tom Peterlee and why.

The police were waiting, virtually encircling the Kingsbrook Centre, when the ram raiders arrived. This time there were only four of them, all inside the stolen Land Rover. If others were following through the narrow streets of the town centre, some prior warning turned them back. The same warning perhaps, maybe no more than feeling or intuition, which halted the Land Rover on the big paved forecourt from which the centre's entrance doors opened.

At first the watchers thought only that the Land Rover was reversing, prior to performing its backwards ramming of the doors. It was a few seconds before it became clear that this was a three-point turn, forwards up to the fifteen-foot-high brick wall, reverse towards the doors, then, while they braced themselves for the crash of the doors going down and the Land Rover backing through, it shot forward again and was away through the alley into the High Street.

But it never entered the wider road. Its occupants left it to block the exit, flung all four doors open, and leapt out. The police, there in thirty seconds, found an empty vehicle, with no trace of any

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occupancy but its owner's and not a print to be found.

He said to Burden, before they made the arrest, "You see, she told us she didn't possess a raincoat and we didn't find one, but in this photo a raincoat is hanging up inside the caravan."

Burden took the magnifying lens from him and looked. "Bright emerald green and the buttons that sort of bone that is part white, part brown."

"She came into the kitchen when she said she did or maybe five minutes earlier. I think it was true she'd finished with Tom, but that she meant to go for a long walk with Heather in order to tell her so, that was a fiction. She wore the raincoat because it was already drizzling and maybe because she knew she looked nice in it. She came to tell Heather she'd be leaving and no doubt that Heather could have him and welcome.

"Did she know Tom beat his wife? Maybe and maybe not. No doubt, she thought that if Tom and she had ever got together permanently he wouldn't beat *her*. But that's by the way. She came into the kitchen and saw Heather crouched against the counter and Tom hitting her in the face.

"It's said that a woman can't really defend herself against a brutal man, but another woman can defend her. What happened to Carol Fox, Mike? Pure anger? Total disillusionment with Tom Peterlee? Some pull of the great sisterhood of women? Perhaps we shall find out. She snatched up a log out of that basket, a strong oak log, and struck him over the back of the head with it. And again and again. Once she'd started she went on in a frenzy—until he was dead."

"One of them," said Burden, "—and I'd say Carol, wouldn't you?—acted with great presence of mind then, organising what they must do. Carol took off the raincoat that was covered with blood and thrust it along with the weapon into the stove. In the hour or so before we got there everything was consumed but part of one of the buttons."

"Carol washed her hands, put on one of Heather's jackets, they took the dog and went out down to the river. It was never, as we thought, Carol providing an alibi for Heather. It was Heather alibiing Carol. They would stay out for three-quarters of an hour, come back and 'find' the body, or even try to get rid of the body, clean up the kitchen, pretend that Tom had gone away. What they didn't foresee was Arlene's arrival."

"But Arlene came an hour early," Burden said.

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"Arlene assumed that her mother had done it and she would think she knew why. The mouse in the corner attacked when the cat's attention was diverted. The worm turned, as grandma turned when her husband struck her once too often."

He said much the same to Arlene Heddon next day after Carol Fox had been charged with murder. "You only told me she was Tom's girlfriend when you thought things were looking bad for your mother. You reasoned that if a man's mistress gave a man's wife an alibi it was bound to seem genuine. In case I didn't believe you and she denied it, you sent me the receipt when you took the film you'd removed from Tom Peterlee's camera along to the York Crest Centre to be processed. I suppose your mother told you the kind of pictures he took."

She shrugged, said rather spitefully, "You weren't so clever. All that about me knowing who'd killed Tom. I didn't know, I thought it was my mother."

He glanced round the caravan, took in the radio and tape player, microwave oven, video, and his eye fell on the small black rectangle he had in the past, without a closer look, taken for a remote control channel changer. Now he thought how lazy you would have to be, how incapacitated almost, to need to change channels by this means. Almost anywhere in here you were within an arm's length of the television set. He picked it up.

It was a tape recorder, five inches long, two inches wide, flat, black. The end with the red "on" light was and always had been turned towards the kitchen area.

So confident had she been in her control of things and perhaps in her superior intelligence that she had not even stripped the tiny label off its underside. Nixon's, York Crest, £54.99—he was certain Arlene hadn't paid £55 for it.

"You can't have that!" She was no longer cool.

"I'll give you a receipt for it," he said, and then, "Gary, no doubt, was with his pals that evening planning the first ram raid. I don't know where, but I know it wasn't the Red Rose at Edenwick."

She was quite silent, staring at him. He fancied she would have liked to snatch the recorder from him but did not quite dare. Serendipity or a long experience in reading faces and drawing conclusions made him say, "Let's hear what you've been taping on here, Miss Heddon."

He heard his own voice, then hers. As clear as a phone conversation. It was a good tape recorder. He thought, yes, Gary Wyatt was

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involved in the first ram raid, the one that took place after the murder and after the first time I came here to talk to her. From then on, from the second time . . .

"I didn't know Carol very well."

"But she was a close friend of your mother's . . ." His voice tailed away into cracklings.

"I haven't lived at home since I was seventeen. I don't know all the friends my mother's got . . ."

"So that was how you did it," he said. "You recorded our conversations and learnt your replies off by heart. That was a way to guarantee your answers would never vary."

In a stiff wooden voice she said, "If you say so."

He got up. "I don't think Gary's going to be with you much longer, Miss Heddon. You'll be visiting him once a month, if you're so inclined. Some say there's a very thin line dividing the cop from the criminal, they've the same kind of intelligence. Your mother tells me you once had ambitions to be a police officer. You've got off to a bad start but maybe it's not too late."

With the recorder in his pocket, stooping as he made his way out of the caravan, he turned back and said, "If you like the idea, give me a ring."

He closed the door behind him and descended the steps onto the muddy field and the cinder path.

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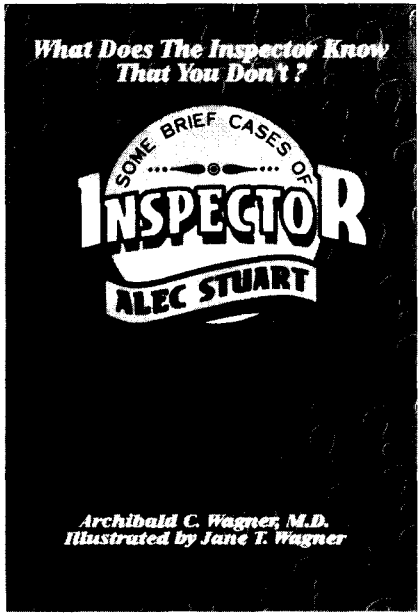
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Mystery author Peter Sellers is also a freelance advertising writer and the editor of an excellent series of Canadian crime anthologies entitled Cold Blood. *In 1992, he was awarded the Derrick Murdoch Award by the Crime Writers of Canada for his contributions to the genre, which include stories published in* Criminal Shorts *and* Northern Frights. EQMM *is pleased to introduce to its pages a writer who already has a distinguished reputation in Canada and has seen the publication of several of his stories in this country in our sister magazine,* Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine. . . .

WHISTLING PAST THE GRAVEYARD

by PETER SELLERS

When MacDonald woke up in the morning the tune was already running through his head. He couldn't think of what it was called, he had no idea why it was there, and he couldn't make it go away. He found himself whistling it, loudly and off-key, and that just made his hangover worse.

He rolled slowly out of bed. Melanie must have left while he was still asleep. He'd got home from the airport about eight o'clock the night before and she'd met him a couple of hours later at his house. Their house, he corrected himself with a smile. The wedding was still two months off but he'd insisted on putting it in both their names as soon as the engagement was announced. He'd asked her to move in with him, too, but she didn't want to do that until the wedding. They'd celebrated his return from Vancouver with a bottle of scotch, but it hit him hard and he'd faded early.

"Damn," he said to himself as he shuffled around the kitchen with a glass of juice in one hand and a coffee in the other. He tried to concentrate on something other than the song, but as the hangover began to fade, the tune grew stronger. This thing is going to bug me all day, he thought as he climbed whistling into the shower.

He whistled the tune as he read the paper and dressed. Never the whole thing, just a few bars of it here and there. Random snatches

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of the verses and the chorus all jumbled up together.

Before leaving his house for work, he searched quickly through his small collection of albums hoping something would twig, but that didn't help. What little he had was jazz and classical.

Driving downtown, he flipped from station to station, from Top Forty to country to MOR, hoping to discover that it was a current hit he'd overheard somewhere, maybe something he'd heard through the headphones on the plane the night before. But nothing turned up.

After a while he just tried listening to himself to figure out what kind of tune it was, as if that might provide a clue. For a while, he was convinced it was a show tune. Something by Sondheim, he was almost certain. Then it began to feel more like a swing number with lots of horns, and then a bluesier thing. That's when he realized he was extemporizing, making up his own arrangements as he went along. Changing the tune, stretching it out, seeing where he could take it.

Jeez, he thought, this thing's turning me into a regular Nelson Riddle. He decided the best thing was just to try to forget about it and eventually the answer would come.

MacDonald worked in a high rise downtown. His office was on the eighth floor, with a view south to the lake. He whistled in the elevator, through the reception area, and into his office. He slipped off his jacket and hung it on the back of the door and was just settling in behind his desk when his secretary popped her head in the door. "Welcome back," she said with a smile. "How was the trip?"

"Strictly business," he told her.

"Condemned to be married, he remained blade straight to the end," she said with a laugh. "Don't forget the meeting at ten."

"I'll be there," he said, then he stopped her before she slipped away. She was young, funky, had the sides of her head shaved, and he knew she was dating a guy who played something electronic in a local band. "Patty," he said, "does this tune mean anything to you?" He whistled several bars, but his tunelessness made it incomprehensible.

Patty listened politely, then shook her head, said, "Ten o'clock. Main boardroom. Don't give up your day job," and left.

MacDonald settled down to the work that had accumulated in the week he'd been gone. Patty stuck her head in the door a short time later. "It's five after ten," she said. "They're waiting. And don't

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whistle like that in the meeting. Jacobs has absolutely no appreciation for music."

The meeting helped take MacDonald's mind off the music, but when it broke up at noon, the tune popped right back. It's like being possessed, he thought with a chuckle. Maybe I need an exorcist. Instead, he went to a music store.

He found the least harassed-looking clerk and asked him the obvious question. Then he tried whistling the tune as close to its original form as he could. When he had finished, the clerk just stared at him and didn't say anything.

MacDonald assumed that meant he didn't know. "Thank you anyway," he said and started towards the door.

"Wait," the clerk called after him. "Er, wait a second. I'm not sure if I know, but someone else might." He moved closer to MacDonald and leaned in and stared hard as if he were trying to count freckles. "Why don't you leave me your name, address, and phone number and we'll get in touch with you as soon as we know."

MacDonald felt uneasy. He didn't like the intensity with which the man was looking at him. Something felt very wrong. MacDonald decided not to wait. "Thanks," he said, "but it isn't that important."

He left the store quickly and walked a block and a half down the street and turned the corner before he stopped and leaned against the wall. He realized he was out of breath and his hands were shaking.

All afternoon he tried not to whistle or hum the tune. He tried to keep it out of his mind completely. But no matter how deeply he buried himself in his ledgers and balance sheets, it kept burrowing to the surface like a mole. He was happier than usual when five o'clock dragged around and he slipped on his suit jacket and slipped out the door. He took the stairs down instead of the elevator, not wanting to catch himself whistling in a crowd. He had no way of knowing what the reaction would be.

He got in his car and drove to Melanie's apartment, hoping she would recognize the tune.

Melanie was waiting for him with a glass of wine. He took it and drank before he kissed her. "What's wrong?" she asked immediately.

MacDonald dropped onto the sofa. "It's weird," he said. "This tune has been going through my head all day and I can't shake it. I can't figure out what it is. And when I asked a guy in a record store I got the strangest reaction."

"Try me," Melanie said, curling up on the sofa next to him.

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A few bars into the tune, Melanie started to smile.

MacDonald's hopes rose. "You know it?"

She shook her head. "I don't even think the guy who wrote it would recognize it. Your whistling stinks. Try again."

He whistled a few more bars, then trailed off discordantly. "Well?"

Melanie had stopped smiling and was looking at him just as strangely as the guy in the record store had.

"What?" he asked.

"What time is it?" she asked, jumping off the sofa and glancing at her watch. "Six-ten. Good." She crossed the room and snapped on the television.

"You're telling me it's the theme from a sitcom or something?" He'd hoped for something less banal.

"Sh. Watch."

MacDonald recognized a familiar local news announcer gazing balefully at the camera as he relayed some unsettling financial news. Behind his head, a jagged line rose and fell, creating what looked like an unfortunate set of horns. MacDonald wondered if the director was sleeping with the announcer's wife and this was his little joke. But that thought left him very quickly when the news item came up. The graphic changed to a picture of a blood-covered knife.

MacDonald's skin prickled as he listened. "There was another in the string of killings that have terrorized area residents over the past five weeks. Last night's victim was twenty-three-year-old student Susan Larraby. Her body was found in a secluded area by joggers earlier this morning. Police remain baffled by the killings, now four since the first victim, nineteen-year-old Debbie Deneau, was found more than five weeks ago. The only significant clue remains the mysterious whistling, which three different witnesses claim to have heard near three of the murder sites. None of the witnesses could identify the tune, but all three did say the whistling was badly off-key."

"Jesus," he said, staring at the screen long after Melanie had switched it off. "You don't think that just because I can't carry a tune . . ."

"Look," she cut him off, "we know you're no killer." But when MacDonald looked at her he wondered if he saw a flicker of doubt in her eyes.

"No," he said, "I'm not. The only thing I killed last night was a bottle." He hoped he sounded convincing.

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"But the way people are feeling right now, just the act of whistling could cause you a lot of trouble."

MacDonald had never been one for the news. He read the sports page and the business press at work, and he enjoyed longer pieces in magazines, but he never read the paper at home. He paid little attention to hard news stories. Global affairs were beyond him and local news bored him. But now he had to know more. "Do you have the papers for the last few weeks?" he asked.

Melanie nodded. "The last couple. A bunch I'm keeping for packing and the rest I just bundled up for recycling. Come on, we'll dig them out."

In two minutes Melanie's living-room floor was littered with newspapers and MacDonald had every line about the rash of killings clutched in his ink-stained hands. He went back to the sofa while Melanie rebundled the papers and pored over the reports, reading everything. The screaming headlines ranged from the responsible, "Slayer Claims Fourth Victim," to the hysterical, "Killer Whistles While He Works." The sidebars, which featured interviews with grieving friends and family, MacDonald found intensely distasteful, and he reminded himself of why he had stopped reading the paper in the first place.

The facts varied little from victim to victim. Four young women, the youngest nineteen, the eldest twenty-eight, all stabbed to death with what appeared to be the same weapon. All the bodies were found in or near small clumps of bushes. None had been sexually molested. None had been robbed. So far, any forensic evidence had yielded nothing significant; at least, nothing the police were talking about. But there was the music. The unidentifiable tune three witnesses all claimed to have heard within fifteen minutes and five hundred yards of three different murder sites.

MacDonald read it all twice. Then he sat silently for a long time trying to convince himself that he didn't slip into some distant recess of his soul and do things that sickened him while Melanie slept.

He spent the evening pacing the floor without talking. Three times he found himself whistling and he cut it off with a curse, wondering how long he'd been doing it. Melanie left him alone, making sure he knew she was there if he wanted to talk but not trying to initiate it. At eleven o'clock, he went to the television set and turned it on. Melanie settled on the couch beside him and placed a hand lightly on his knee. He covered it with his own and they watched in silence.

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Ten minutes into the newscast, they repeated the story from earlier in the day. A few details had been added, all but one insignificant. This report added the news that an unidentified man had asked a local record-store clerk to identify a tune he was whistling. The clerk couldn't, but felt the man's behavior was so peculiar he called the police. Then the screen was filled with a frighteningly accurate computer-generated likeness of MacDonald.

The phone rang ten minutes later, rupturing the silence in the room. They exchanged glances and Melanie whispered, "What should we do?" as if the person on the other end of the line could hear her. MacDonald just nodded and she picked up the phone. "Hello?" she said. MacDonald watched the tension melt from her face and heard her laugh with relief and she held the phone out to him. "It's Pike," she said.

MacDonald took the phone and before he could say anything, Pike was talking. "They got you pegged pretty good there, pal. Although the picture was a little too good-looking to be spot on. What the hell happened?"

MacDonald started to tell him, then said, "I don't want to talk about it on the phone. I don't know what the hell to do."

"Sit tight. Don't answer the phone. Don't answer the door or anything. I'm on my way over. I'll be there in half an hour," and he hung up.

MacDonald tried to sit tight, but found he couldn't sit at all. Melanie watched him pace a circuit around the small apartment, from room to room in a tireless parade. He was in the kitchen getting a drink when Pike rapped on the door twenty minutes later with a jaunty shave-and-a-haircut rhythm and Melanie heard the smash of a glass and MacDonald swearing sharply.

Melanie opened the door and Pike breezed through, glancing a kiss off her cheek and pulling off his coat as he moved.

The three of them had been friends ever since Pike had come to work in the office next to MacDonald's. He'd left again eight months later; changing jobs was as habitual with him as changing girlfriends, but he and MacDonald had stayed in close touch. They met two or three times a month for lunch, and he was a frequent dinner guest at both MacDonald's house and Melanie's apartment. Often, they would go to Pike's place. It was a small, one-bedroom apartment which Pike frequently claimed he was chained to, likely unable ever to afford a house at Toronto prices. "Where's the villain?" he asked as Melanie closed and locked the door.

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Melanie jerked her head towards the kitchen and Pike walked over and saw MacDonald on his knees, sweeping shards of glass into a battered metal dustpan. "I'm surprised they let you handle anything sharp," Pike said with a laugh.

"This isn't funny." MacDonald's edginess made the words snap out more harshly than he'd intended. "Sorry," he added as he dumped the glass into the garbage.

"I understand. No problem. Because of some weird coincidence you could be in big trouble. That'd put me on edge, for sure. But we'll sort it out. We know you're not the guy. It'll be easy enough to prove. We'll just plot out your life for the last five weeks." He opened the fridge door and peered in. "You want a drink?"

MacDonald nodded. "I didn't get much of my last one."

"Wine, beer?"

MacDonald's stomach turned over. "Just juice."

Pike poured it out and twisted open a beer for himself and continued. "We write down every move you made for the whole time, as much as you can remember. Then we retrace the steps. We're bound to come up against people that remember you, who can put you certain places at the times that prove you couldn't have killed anybody."

"But I didn't kill anybody."

Pike put a hand on his chest. "I know that. You know that. She knows that. But the cops aren't as wise as us."

"Maybe not, but they sure aren't stupid, and now that they've got my picture on network TV I expect to see a couple of uniforms at the door any minute and they won't be selling raffle tickets for the widows and orphans fund."

"Hey, hey, calm down. It's eleven-thirty at night. Most of the people you know won't have seen that at all. The rest of them won't believe it was you. How long was it on the screen? Four, five seconds? Tomorrow, when it's in the paper, that's when you got trouble."

"This is supposed to make me calm down?"

Pike shrugged and sipped his beer. "Look, what it means is we've got until business opens tomorrow to figure out a plan. First, tell me all about how they got your picture."

When MacDonald was finished, Pike whistled softly. "Jeez, what a fluke. What are the odds that some guy selling records is to put that together and call the cops? Just your luck you had to run into an upstanding citizen."

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"Fluke or not, it happened, and now my face is out there for everybody to see. How far do you think we'll get without my being recognized?"

Pike waved his hand in dismissal. "We'll throw a disguise on you. A hat and some glasses and nobody'll know you from Adam. All the time the cops run hunts for people a lot less ordinary-looking than you with their faces plastered all over the place and nobody ever turns them in. People don't make the connection between what a mocked-up picture looks like on an over-inked newspaper page and somebody in the flesh. Besides, we don't need five weeks. We can retrace your steps, what we need to, in a day." He turned to Melanie. "We'll need a few sheets of paper and a pen." He sat on the sofa. "Oh, and another beer."

For the next two hours they sat huddled around the coffee table as Pike jotted down details from the last month and a half of MacDonald's life. From the moment he woke up on the morning of the first murder until Melanie'd arrived at his house the evening before. There were gaps, of course, and a lot of dates and times were sketchy, but Pike made note of places and people who might have some reason for remembering MacDonald, no matter how obscure. The waiter he undertipped at lunch one day and the bookstore clerk he chatted with briefly another. In the end it covered four sheets of paper in Pike's cramped, illegible hand. MacDonald looked at it in dismay. "I hope you can read that," he said.

Pike looked at it, then nodded. "Maybe I'll clean it up a little."

While Pike transcribed parts of the list, MacDonald looked at the newspaper again. He opened to an article that featured pictures of all the victims. He looked carefully at the row of faces, feeling a mixture of sadness at their fate and anger that he was being blamed. Each picture was square, cut to exactly the same dimensions. One was a graduation photo. One was obviously clipped from a family portrait, an anonymous shoulder protruding into the frame. Another looked like a photo from the kind of vending machines you find in bowling alleys, shopping malls, and bus stations.

In each case he saw a young, smiling face framed by dark hair hanging to the shoulders or beyond and parted in the middle. He noticed that each of them had the same eyebrows, long, dark, and arching. Each woman had a similar nose and chin and the same broad forehead. Each woman, he realized with growing horror, could have been mistaken for Melanie.

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He tossed the paper to the floor and Melanie and Pike turned to look at him. "What's the matter?" Melanie asked.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Pike said.

"Maybe four of them," MacDonald said. "I need that drink now."

He walked across the room and rattled the bottles in the liquor cabinet, looking for the scotch. Finding it, he poured a few ounces into a glass and swallowed half. He took the glass back to his seat, leaving the bottle uncorked on the liquor cabinet.

Pike had picked up the paper and was looking at the pictures. "Mel," he said, "look at this."

As she looked, she shook her head in disbelief. "Mac . . ." she started to say, then let it hang.

Pike broke the silence. "Let's start by thinking. The cops say all these women were killed by the same guy, so all we have to do is cook up an alibi for you for one of the killings and you'll be clear."

MacDonald nodded. That made sense to him. If only he could remember what he'd done when. As with most people, dates tended to fade and run together in his memory, unless there was a ticket stub or credit-card slip or other tangible souvenir to remind him of exactly where he'd been on a given day.

"We'll work backwards," Pike said. "From the last one. They must give time of death or something in the paper." He rustled through the pages, scanning quickly. "Here. She was found at approximately ten-twenty. You weren't scheduled to come in until half past. That should do it right there."

MacDonald shook his head. "I took an earlier flight. I even called Melanie from Vancouver. I was in here by seven-thirty. Lots of time to get anywhere in the city." He drained his glass and went for a refill.

"What about the one before?"

Melanie turned to the paper this time. "Okay, she was killed sometime between six-fifteen, when she was last seen alive, and seven-fifty, when the body was found. On Tuesday, the eighteenth."

Pike rubbed his jaw and thought. "The eighteenth?" Pike turned to the notes. "The eighteenth?"

"The library," MacDonald said. "That was the day we took the afternoon off to celebrate my raise and we had that argument about Terry Sawchuck's goals against average, or something stupid like that, and we went to the library to check it out."

"That's it," Pike said, snapping his fingers. "That's it. I'm just surprised you remember any of it at all, you were so tanked up, but

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they'll remember us at the library for sure." He looked at his watch. "Jesus, it's late. I'm gonna go home and catch a few winks. I'll be back here early and we'll wrap this thing up, no problem. You get some sleep, Mac, and we'll see you in the morning." He clapped MacDonald on the shoulder, kissed Melanie on the cheek, and left.

MacDonald tried to sleep but spent most of the night standing at the balcony doors looking out over the city wondering if he would suddenly be seized by the desire to kill. And wondering whether Melanie would be next. He didn't say this to her, didn't say much of anything, and after a while she slipped quietly away and went to bed.

When dawn came through the glass it found MacDonald dozing fitfully on the sofa. Melanie found him there, too.

Pike was back at nine o'clock. He came into the apartment with a newspaper under his arm and a paper shopping bag in his hand. He tossed the bag to MacDonald and handed the paper to Melanie. "Put those on," he said.

MacDonald looked into the bag. "What for?"

"We're going to the library."

"If I go outside, someone'll recognize me."

"If you stay in here, you got no chance to defend yourself. Put on the disguise."

Reluctantly, MacDonald pulled a long coat with a high collar, a hat, and a pair of sunglasses from the bag. He turned up the collar and pulled the hat low over his face. He was about to put on the shades when Melanie said softly, "Oh, my God."

MacDonald looked at her and she handed him the paper. There, on the front page, was another Melanie look-alike and a screaming headline, "Serial Killer Strikes in Vancouver?"

MacDonald was too stunned to react. He just stared at the paper as Pike read over his shoulder. "They just found the body last night, but she'd been missing three days," he said. "It says the knife wounds match the ones on the victims here."

MacDonald started to laugh slightly. "I don't believe this. How the hell am I going to explain this? You may as well call the cops right now. They already think I did it. Now I'm in Vancouver for six lousy days and there's a killing there, too. Maybe I did do it, I don't know."

"Knock it off," Pike said. "Start thinking like that and you're finished. Come on, let's go to the library."

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The library was a sprawling one-story building that sat on one corner of a city block. A row of maples separated the building from the sidewalk, and the rest of the block was taken up by a large park, half wooded and half playground.

MacDonald was slouched in the backseat of Pike's car, his face almost totally hidden behind the hat and glasses. "Wasn't one of the bodies found in a park?" he asked as Pike pulled up in front of the library.

Pike nodded. "Yep."

"This one," Melanie added, her voice a whisper.

"Jesus," MacDonald said as he climbed out of the car.

The library desk was opposite the front doors, with the adult section to the left and children's books to the right. At the back of the adult section was a reading area in which a handful of chairs formed a ring around a low wooden table littered with magazines. Along the outside walls stood several study carrels, and the high glass windows looked out over the park. Near the back of the section they could see a librarian taking books from a trolley and reshelving them. A second librarian was doing paperwork behind the counter. Pike approached her and cleared his throat. "Excuse me," he said.

The librarian looked up. She was middle-aged and her eyes were very bright and eager. "May I help you?" she asked in a way that made you not want her to start helping because of the fear that she might never stop.

"Yes," Pike said. MacDonald winced as he waited to find out what was coming. "I'm wondering if you were on duty on Tuesday evening, the eighteenth?"

"Why do you ask? Are you from the police?"

MacDonald wanted to scream and run but found his legs would not move. Pike was unperturbed. "Why, you haven't been writing in the books, have you, or folding back the corners of the pages?" He gave her his warmest smile and she joined in on the joke with a smile of her own. "No," Pike went on, "we're not police. Far from it. It's just that my friend was in here that night and he may have left something behind."

The librarian peered carefully at MacDonald, who was thankful he hadn't taken off his glasses. "What did he leave?" she asked, as if MacDonald wasn't there at all, although she was still staring right at him.

"Some notes. Research. We just wonder if anyone here found them, or if you even remember seeing him in here."

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"Well, I'm pretty good with faces, but I can't be sure unless he takes those sunglasses off."

Pike nudged MacDonald. "Take 'em off."

MacDonald looked at Melanie for help but she just nodded. He slipped off the glasses. It felt like he was taking off his clothes on the subway.

"And the hat," the librarian said.

MacDonald complied and the librarian peered at him for a long time. Then her eyes lit up even more. "Yes," she said, "of course. He was here and I had to ask him to be quiet. It was Tuesday night. I must say, he seemed a little bit tipsy."

Pike nodded. "One of his stocks went way up. He made a killing and he was celebrating. You're sure it was the eighteenth?"

She looked mildly offended. "Of course I'm sure. I remember because of the whistling."

"Whistling?" Pike asked.

MacDonald's lungs felt like they were being squeezed.

"Yes. It was disturbing some people. You know, we do try to maintain an atmosphere conducive to study."

"Of course," Pike said, with great understanding. "Was the whistling that loud?"

"Not so much loud as—" she hunted for the right word "—atonal. Off-key." A touch of mist clouded her eyes as she added, "The way my late husband used to whistle." Then her eyes settled on Melanie. "You were with him, too," she said firmly. "And so, now that I think of it, were you." She settled her gaze on Pike. "But then when we were closing we found this one alone, asleep in one of the carrels. It took forever to wake him up and—"

"What time was that?" Pike interrupted.

"Closing time. Eight-thirty."

"You're sure it was him?"

"Absolutely. But I don't remember any notes," she said. "Except the whistling. Musical notes." Pike smiled politely and they left the library.

Back in the car, safely behind his glasses and drooping hat, MacDonald said, "So what does that all mean?"

"What it means, buddy, is that you have an alibi for one of the killings. And, since all the killings were done by the same person, that puts you in the clear."

Melanie turned in her seat to smile at MacDonald. "This calls for a celebration," she said.

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* * *

The roast was cooking at 350 degrees and Pike was in the kitchen washing vegetables as Melanie set the table and MacDonald sat sipping a glass of wine on the sofa. They'd gone back to Pike's place, trying to buy a little extra time before the police arrived. MacDonald wasn't sure why, but he'd stopped worrying about that happening. He was sure they would soon enough, but it didn't bother him too much. Knowing he had even a scrap of an alibi helped somewhat, but mostly it was just that he felt resigned and it was less painful to accept the inevitable than to rail against it.

He watched Melanie as she laid out the place settings. He noticed she was using all the crystal and china, setting the forks and spoons and steak knives down silently on the cloth napkins. She put out water in a cut-glass pitcher and opened a fine claret and poured it with a soft gurgling into a Waterford decanter.

Satisfied, she said, "I'm going downstairs to get the paper. I'll be back in a few minutes." She went out and pulled the door shut behind her. MacDonald noticed that it didn't click all the way to and he got up and walked across to close it. As he passed the kitchen he noticed that Pike (as he always did, MacDonald realized) was whistling to himself as he cooked. MacDonald recognized a snatch of "Melancholy Baby" and then a larger piece of "The Lady Is a Tramp." And then he heard something that froze him in his tracks. A song he knew well, one that had long been a favorite of Melanie's. He knew exactly what it was but something in him had to make sure. He asked, trying to keep his voice casual, "What's that song, Pike?"

"Huh? Oh, 'Mac the Knife.' Speaking of knives, can you bring me the knife from the table, please?"

"One of the steak knives?" MacDonald asked.

"No, the big carving knife. I need to sharpen it."

It lay to the right of Pike's place at the table, the blade elevated on a knife rest. MacDonald picked it up. "This new?" he asked, telling himself his suspicions were all wrong. "I've never seen it before."

"Yeah," Pike said. "It's only been used a few times. Nice, huh? Feel the balance on it."

MacDonald moved the knife up and down on the palm of his hand. "Feels okay, I guess."

"You bet. Give it a good grip. See how natural it feels in your hand."

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MacDonald wrapped his fist around the handle. It felt hard and cold and solid. Then MacDonald turned the knife sideways and ran it across his thumbnail, peeling off a thin layer of tissue. "It seems pretty sharp already," he said.

"Yeah," Pike said. "But I like it to be just so, you know?"

MacDonald stood just outside the kitchen holding the knife, the strange knife he'd never seen before and which felt so good in his hand, and listened to Pike's whistling and it all became clear to him.

"Mac, can I have the knife please?" Pike said.

MacDonald went into the kitchen. "What did you think?" he asked. "That you could pin it on me and she would fall into your arms?"

Pike hadn't been paying attention. "Huh?" he grunted.

"You've always been close with her. Maybe closer than I suspect. You know my house is already half in her name. You know the bank accounts are transferred. You thought if I was arrested she'd turn to you, taking my house with her." MacDonald's voice was flat and calm but his eyes were wide and dilated.

Pike looked at him and at the knife, which was now waving in the air between them, and he held out his hand. "Just give me the knife please, Mac," he said softly, reaching out a rubber-gloved hand from which soap suds dripped in steady drops.

Of course, MacDonald told himself, gloves. He's wearing gloves, and like a fool I've been blithely smearing the knife with my fingerprints. Incriminating myself as surely as if I'd confessed. The knife that's been used only a few times, to slit a few pale throats. Pike took a step forward, gloved hand still outstretched, and MacDonald started to back away, then realized he still held the knife and feinted forward. Pike jerked back, his hands coming up in front of his face abruptly, throwing droplets of water across the room, hitting MacDonald's face like spring rain.

"How could you do it?" MacDonald asked, taking a step forward.

Pike moved back again. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, his tongue darting out to moisten suddenly dry lips. "Please, just give me the knife."

"So you can use it on me?" MacDonald asked, closing the gap again.

Pike tried a joke, because surely to God, MacDonald was only joking. "I only want to use it on the roast," Pike said.

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"How stupid do you think I am?" MacDonald asked, the knife moving in wide sweeping circles, which Pike watched with hypnotized fascination, like a small animal watching the dance of the cobra. Each man took another step into the kitchen and Pike felt his legs press against the small kitchen table. End of the line.

"How could you kill all those women? You knew where I was as well as I did. You killed them near where I'd been. You did it knowing I'd been seen. You whistled that tune hoping I'd pick it up. You even flew to Vancouver when I was there to make things even more perfect. I know everything you've done, but you won't get away with it. You won't make me your scapegoat."

"It wasn't like that . . ." Pike started to say, then realized it was useless. Abruptly, he lunged to his left towards the open cutlery drawer. He knew exactly where the steak knives were but his fingers were clumsy in the rubber gloves and by the time they closed around the handle of one and he swung around to point it at MacDonald he felt the sharpness of the carving knife as it tore between his ribs. He tried to bring his arm up to defend himself, but it wouldn't respond. Then he felt the bite of the carving knife again, heard somewhere the distant clatter of his own knife hitting the floor, and then watched as the room spun around him as he fell.

MacDonald was kneeling over Pike when the apartment door opened and Melanie came in. "Mac," she called out.

He tried to answer her but couldn't find his voice. He heard her looking in the bedroom and the bathroom, calling his name. Then he became aware of her standing in the kitchen door. "Oh, my God," she said quietly.

"He killed them," MacDonald heard himself saying. "He killed all of them and he wanted to pin it on me, so I'd be out of the way, so he could have you and the house and the money." He realized that he was sobbing.

"I'd better call the police," Melanie said and went into the living room.

As she punched 911 and waited for a response, MacDonald could hear her whistling to herself. Kneeling beside Pike's body, he couldn't help but notice how tuneless and off-key she sounded.

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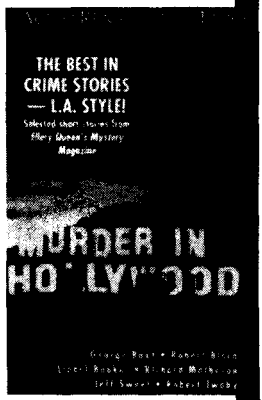

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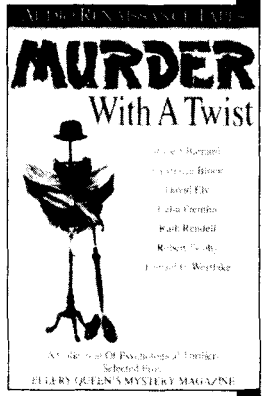

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A writer of short mystery fiction since the age of eight, Penelope Wallace has also been active in writers associations. She was the first woman to chair the British Press Club, and is a past chairperson of both the Crime Writers Association and The Society of Women Writers and Journalists. She lives in Oxford, England, where she settled during World War II. . . .

MY FRIEND SAM

by PENELOPE WALLACE

"I've read that there's a bond between a son and his mother—but there certainly wasn't between Mum and me.

About the first thing I can remember is Mum telling a new friend about the awfulness of her pregnancy and the terrible agonies of labour and childbirth.

"And I said to Brian," she recounted, "I'm not going through that again; not for anything. Of course he was disappointed, but I'd given him a son"; she didn't add "such as he is," but I know she felt it.

I don't remember what I wore in those days, but I do remember when I first went to school and my clothes were several sizes too large.

"You'll grow into them," said Mum, and I did—and out of them.

Dad said I needed new shorts and Mum said we couldn't afford it.

"He's going to be big like you," she told him. "Long arms and big feet. I can't keep up with him."

Dad was tall and I hoped I'd be just like him when I grew up. He was gentle and kind, but I hoped I'd have a bit more fight because he let Mum boss him; she was a slight five three but she had a sharp tongue and a way of putting you in the wrong.

My mate John, at school, says there's an old music hall song about a little woman bossing a big man—his grandfather told him about it. I hadn't got a grandfather but I had an aunt—Dad's sister. Auntie Carrie was a lot like Dad and I was very fond of her and not just because she gave me brilliant presents.

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"Can't think where Carrie gets her money," said Mum. "She's unemployed but she spends money like water."

Dad said that Auntie Carrie liked spending her money, such as it was, on other people.

And that made me think. Mum spent money on herself, her clothes, "her" house—where it showed; but, basically, she was mean; and I understood why Grandad—Dad's father, who died when I was two—had taken out some sort of insurance to pay for my education; Mum would rather I went to a council school.

I think I was eight when I realised that. It was just before Sam came into my life. It was September and Sam was a black mongrel—still a puppy—with big brown eyes and a long feathery wagging tail. He followed me home one day on my way back from school.

Mum was out and he looked so hungry, so I wiped his paws with my handkerchief and took him into the kitchen. In the fridge there was some cold beef and I thought I could cut him a slice and Mum wouldn't notice. I found the carving knife and I didn't cut much. Sam wolfed the meat, then Mum came back and all hell broke loose. A dog in her kitchen and a mongrel at that; then she saw the joint and she was off again.

"He's my dog," I said without conviction.

As luck would have it, Dad came home early. He took it all in. Mum furious, Sam cowering in a corner, and me red with rage. I'd just told Mum that I hated her.

"Now Tom," he said, "I won't have talk like that. Apologise to your mother."

"I'm sorry, Mum," I said—but I wasn't.

Then I got the shock of my life because Dad took a tenner from his pocket and said to me:

"Go down to the shops and get some tins of dog food and a collar and lead."

I ran all the way.

When I got back Dad was in the kitchen with Sam. We gave him a bath in the sink and I put on his new collar; he looked beautiful.

Dad told me I'd have to get up early every morning and take Sam for a walk on the Common before I went to school, and a walk every night before I went to bed.

"I'll give you the money for his food," Dad told me, "and if you have to take him to the vet—like when he has his distemper jab—but anything else comes out of your pocket money. You put his

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meal up for him before you go to school and Mum'll put it down for him midday."

I didn't think Mum would like that but I didn't say anything.

"I rang the police station," he went on, "in case someone had reported him missing, but no one had."

He turned to Sam.

"By the look of you, no one's looked after you for quite a while."

Sam thumped his tail in agreement and Dad ran his hand over Sam's skinny ribs.

"I reckon someone turned him out," he said.

I don't know what Dad had said to Mum while I was off spending his tenner, but she only made one remark about Sam.

"He's going to be a big dog. He's got big feet."

Sam always kept as far away from Mum as he could; he knew she didn't like him.

I wondered whether Dad would go on standing up to Mum and I'd get some new trousers, but I didn't, so I guessed he'd made his once-in-a-lifetime gesture. Anyway, I'd rather have Sam and put up with the too-small clothes.

On Saturday afternoons and in the holidays, I'd take Sam on the Common for hours; sometimes Dad would come with us, and sometimes John would meet up with us and he and Sam and I would play on the Common.

Aunt Carrie came for Christmas; she said Sam was smashing and she went to the Common with Dad and me and Sam; we couldn't go very fast because she got puffed—Mum says it's because she's overweight and smokes—but we all had a great time.

After tea on Christmas Day, Mum said:

"We're going to Benidorm this summer. Don't know what we'll do with the dog."

She never called him Sam.

"Kennels, I suppose," said Dad.

"Very expensive," snapped Mum, "we can't afford that."

She had a triumphant look and I thought she meant to turn Sam out. I put my arms round him. It was news to me about Benidorm; we'd always gone to Eastbourne and I'd thought Sam would come with us.

Auntie Carrie saved my life.

"No problem," she said, "I'll look after him."

"But Carrie," said Dad, "you've only got a small flat."

"Big enough for us two, and Sam's a well-behaved dog."

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She turned to me.

"No Common in the city, but I'll walk him with his lead, and I'll look after him."

I gave her a hug.

Dad looked happy and Mum looked furious.

Sam had grown a lot by the time he went to stay with Aunt Carrie; Mum was right—he was going to be a big dog.

Benidorm was boring and I missed Sam, but I enjoyed the flights even though we had to sit ages at the airport at both ends.

Sam was happy to see me and we went up to the Common to celebrate.

Time passed . . .

Sam grew to his full size. Auntie Carrie got more puffed, but she still looked after him while we went to Benidorm. Then, when I was thirteen, I met a German girl there—she was my age and Benidorm was not so boring; but I still missed Sam.

John and I stayed mates and sometimes on the Common we would meet other people exercising their dogs—especially girls from the high school.

Now I am sixteen and Sam is eight, which is middle-aged for a dog, and he doesn't run about as much, but he's still very active. Next month we're off to Benidorm but Sam won't be going to stay with Aunt Carrie because, after Christmas, the overweight and the smoking took their toll and she died of a heart attack.

"What about the dog?" asked Mum.

"Kennels," replied Dad.

"And who's paying? You can't afford to and it's not as if your son's saved from a Saturday job *or* a holiday job."

"Rita, he was studying for his 'O' levels and he got eight—all *A*s and *B*s. Now he's working for his 'A' levels. He wouldn't have had time."

Good old Dad.

"What about the dog; it'll have to go."

"No," I said.

"It'll have to go sometime. You'll be going to college—waste of time but there we are—and if you think I'm going to look after it, you're very much mistaken."

"You mean have him put down?" asked Dad.

"No you can't . . ." I began.

"No," said Mum. "Vets cost money. It was lost before, it can be lost again."

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"He wouldn't get lost round here," said Dad. "He'd just come home."

"Not here. I mean on the way to the airport."

Dad looked unhappy.

I felt physically sick.

I took Sam out for his evening walk. We walked a long way and I did a lot of thinking.

This morning we were all up early. As I put on Sam's collar, I could feel where Mum had prised off the nameplate.

Mum thinks of all the details.

I took Sam for a short walk, then we had breakfast and loaded the car. Mum got into the nearside rear seat of our four-door sedan and I got in beside her with Sam on his lead.

Dad is a good driver and we headed for Heathrow on the M.40, going fast in the middle lane with traffic behind us.

"I'm sorry, Sam," I told him, "I have to do this."

Mum opened the car door.

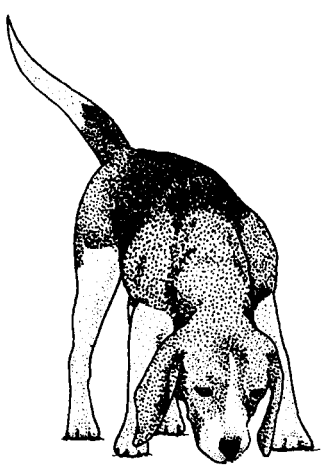
"Now," she said.

I heard the thump on the road, the squeal of brakes from the car following us, and the thump as it went over the body.

It was all over.

I wiped my forehead.

Maybe Dad will miss Mum, but not nearly as much as I'd have missed Sam.



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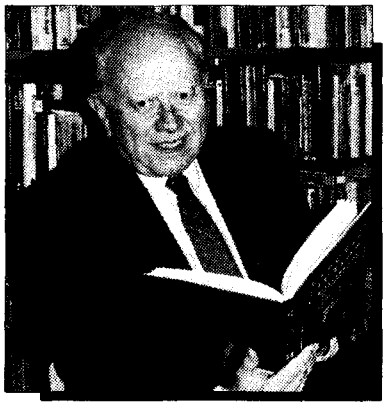

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Edward D. Hoch

Photo by Bruce Cassiday

Edward D. Hoch and Patricia Hoch

Edward D. Hoch first began writing for *EQMM* in 1961, but this month we mark a very special anniversary, for since May of 1973 the author has had a story in every issue of this magazine.

It was no chance sequence of events that led Ed Hoch to publish in *EQMM*, nor was it simply the pre-eminent position of this publication in the genre. For as a boy his first acquaintance with mystery fiction was through the radio program *The Adventures of Ellery Queen*, which debuted in 1939, and the first adult book he ever read was Ellery Queen's *The Chinese Orange Mys-*

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tery, which he selected from the drugstore rack because of his fascination with the radio program. Publication in *EQMM*, by editor Fred Dannay (who authored the Ellery Queen stories with his cousin Manfred Lee), was therefore always an aspiration of Ed Hoch's from the time he first started writing mystery fiction in high school.

Today Ed Hoch is the pre-eminent writer of short mystery fiction in the classic style. While many writers have abandoned formal detection in favor of crime-suspense tales that often have more to do with other themes and subplots than with the basic puzzle, Mr. Hoch has developed to a high art the complex "miniature" tale of detection in which a full cast of characters, and clues and deductions adequate to a full-length novel are presented in some seven or eight thousand words.

Asked why, with this capacity for full-scale plotting, he has written so few (5) novels, Ed Hoch told us that ideas come to him so fast that he grows impatient with a novel: before he can complete the writing of it, he's already absorbed in the plot for another mystery.

The greatest testament to the fertility of Ed Hoch's imagination is the 710 short stories he has published to date. He has created two dozen series characters, many of whom debuted in *EQMM*, and is also the author of many non-series mystery tales and stories belonging to other genres. Since 1976 he has been the editor of *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories*, currently published by Walker Books, a task in which he was preceded by distinguished editor/writers Allen J. Hubin and Anthony Boucher. Thus, in addition to continuing to write for *EQMM* and other publications, the author in his capacity as editor, with the help of his wife of thirty-five years, Patricia, reads virtually every short story published in the genre. We toast a great figure in the mystery field on the occasion of this twentieth anniversary!

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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

On the occasion of Ed Hoch's twentieth anniversary as a regular contributor to EQMM, *we have chosen a story featuring the newest of his series sleuths. Asked to explain our choice, we might point to the fact that Michael Vlado (who debuted in 1985) is a character rife with possibilities for future stories, settled as he is in one of the most unstable regions of the world, in which historic events are taking place at an astonishing pace. To kick off a new decade with Mr. Hoch, who we hope will be writing for us for many years to come, we therefore think it appropriate to begin with a new adventure of the Gypsy king. . . .*

THE HIDING PLACE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was Michael Vlado's wife Rosanna who first told him about the terrible events in Valeni la Posului, a tiny settlement about 250 miles northwest of Bucharest. What happened there on a balmy August night was, unfortunately, not unique to the times. A mob of angry, torch-wielding neighbors had descended upon sixty Gypsy families and set fire to their houses, driving them from the community. The families, grabbing up screaming children, horses, and dogs, had fled into the night and only barely escaped with their lives.

"Where did you hear this?" Michael asked, bringing the horses in after a long workout in the field.

Rosanna, a pleasant, quiet woman who usually took little interest in events outside their own village, told him, "One of the tribe, Canno's brother Aurel, is here seeking food. Many families are liv-

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ing in tents in a meadow not far from the settlement, afraid for their lives. The land they'd cultivated for generations is now gone."

Michael was the king of their particular tribe, and it was his duty to meet with Aurel Canno. Going down the hill to the Canno house near the road, he saw that others had come too, attracted by news of this latest outrage against their people. While men and women stood talking in small groups, Michael was introduced to Aurel. He was a slender man with dark hair and a moustache that set off his olive-colored skin. There were many Gypsies with his coloring in Mediterranean countries, but one rarely encountered them this far north. He looked nothing like his brother.

"Tell me what happened," Michael Vlado said. "What was it that so enraged your neighbors?" He knew it could have been a trifle, the smallest of incidents. These days anything served as an excuse to drive the Gypsies from their land, often to kill them.

"The government recently released a Gypsy from prison. He had served a fifteen-year sentence for raping and murdering a woman in another town. He would still have been in prison except that the new government was feeling lenient toward all prisoners. Anyway, he came to our settlement because his mother lived among us. Many did not want him, but as we debated the issue over several weeks he raped a village woman who was eight months pregnant. The outraged villagers came with their torches that night. We tried to tell them that the man had already fled, but it made no difference. Our houses, many of them only one-room mud-brick structures with wooden roofs, were burned and flattened."

"Where are you now?"

"In a meadow some miles away, out of sight of the road. We live in plastic and tarpaulin tents, raising our few animals, trying to stay alive. Right now we are in desperate need of food."

"Have you attempted to return to the old settlement?"

Aurel Canno shook his head. "I sneaked back one day last week. A shepherd was grazing his flock where my house had stood just a few weeks ago."

Michael made his decision in an instant. "We will give you food to take back, and I will go with you to see the people. Perhaps there is more that can be done."

That evening, when he told Rosanna, she gave him some of the little wooden animals she carved. "Take these to the children," she said. "They might bring smiles to at least a few faces."

* * *

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Aurel had made the journey to their village on the back of a bony horse. He left the animal with his brother, in hopes that a few weeks of plentiful oats and hay would put on a few pounds, and agreed to ride back in Michael's car. Their destination was nearly two hundred miles to the north, over rugged mountain roads, and it was into the evening hours before the slender man indicated they were almost there.

"You turn here, onto this dirt road. About a mile farther along we'll have to leave the car and walk over a small hill."

Michael Vlado did as he was instructed. He parked the car beneath a tree, half hidden from view, in hopes it would be safe there. The trunk and backseat held sacks of grain, flour, and other foodstuffs, and he wanted to get them unpacked before dark. As they reached the top of the rise he saw below them a village of tents, nearly fifty in all, many of them makeshift affairs of the crudest plastic. The summer sun was setting as they trudged down the hill and were greeted by Aurel's wife and children.

"We were watching for you," his wife told him. She was a dour woman in her thirties, beaten down by the life she'd been forced to lead. Aurel introduced her as Angela and she gave the briefest of nods in Michael's direction.

"There's grain and flour and other things in the car," Aurel said. "The children can help us with it."

They all went back in a group, accompanied by a couple of older boys from an adjoining tent. When Angela saw the food her spirits brightened a bit. "Thank you, Michael Vlado," she said. "You must spend the night with us before journeying back to your village."

"Thank you," he replied, all too willing to accept the invitation. The mountain roads at night were not a place for a sleepy driver.

In the morning he gave Rosanna's little carved animals to Aurel and Angela's children and the children from the adjoining tents. Walking with Aurel as he prepared to depart, Michael was struck again by the squalid conditions of the camp. Half-starved horses wandered listlessly while mangy dogs stalked the outskirts of the area seeking their own food. Occasionally one would take off after some small field creature, with the others in hot pursuit.

"You would do better in a town," Michael advised. "Anyplace would be an improvement. What will you do when winter comes?"

"We have thought about that. No town would take in nearly three hundred Roms. It would mean splitting into individual families and perhaps concealing our true identities."

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They'd reached the edge of a stream where some of the people were bathing. One man, large and hairy, emerged from the water as they watched. "Michael, this is our leader and king, Gheorghe Langur."

Michael went down the bank to clutch the powerful hand of the hairy man. He was about fifty, with gray already speckling his close-cropped beard. "I heard that you brought food," he said. "Thank you." He dried the water from his body with a frayed and faded towel. "These people need every sort of help."

While he dressed in his pants and tunic, Michael asked what other aid they had received. "Does the Romanian government do anything for you?"

"Nothing, nothing. German aid workers visited once and sent a shipment of food. We received rice, cereal, condensed milk, and chocolate. What you brought last night will go into the common store, for the good of all. I must post a guard every night to keep the gluttons from stealing it."

"Your old neighbors in Valeni la Posului do not bother you?"

"It is always a fear that they will ride here with their torches and burn us out again, but so far they have left us alone. I have met with their leaders, trying to mediate a return for my people, but our best efforts have failed. They do not want us back."

Much as he wanted to, Michael could not invite them to travel south to his village of Gravita in the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps. Three hundred people would double the size of his settlement, overwhelming its resources. "Perhaps we can send more aid," he told Langur, "now that we know of your problems here."

"There are others like us across the countryside, driven from our homes. It is ironic that we Roms who choose not to migrate should be driven to it by the all-consuming hatred of our neighbors."

"It was the rape, of course, that started it."

"The rape, yes."

"And the man has fled?"

"He is gone. We have not seen him."

"What is his name?"

"Tonio Bacau. I knew he was trouble from the day he arrived in the village at the beginning of summer. I hope we are rid of him for good now."

"He came to visit his mother?"

"Yes, after serving all those years in prison. It taught him nothing. He found a pregnant village woman and raped her. It is God's grace that he did not kill her too."

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Their conversation was interrupted by a shout from the water. "Horsemen coming!"

Two riders were approaching, cutting across the stream diagonally from the opposite bank. In the lead was a man in tattered clothing, his face covered with grease paint. In that setting, at that time of the morning, it took Michael a moment to realize the face was that of a grinning circus clown. With one hand he tipped the shabby hat that he wore and announced, "Greetings to all from Asive the Clown! Are there children here to be entertained?"

"We have children," Langur answered cautiously.

Michael's attention shifted to the second of the riders, a young woman with long black hair hanging almost to her waist. She wore a flowing gown of diaphanous pink material, though underneath he could see flesh-colored tights and low-cut riding boots. She dismounted now and led her horse out of the stream, following the clown's lead.

Itinerant circuses were nothing new in this part of Europe, though Michael could not remember seeing one as small as this, with only two performers. He followed along as Langur led them the short distance to the camp. The sight of the clown in his tattered costume brought the children running. He immediately began to juggle rubber balls and do a tumbling act that brought awe, delight, and finally laughter to their faces.

"He's quite good," Michael said, finding himself standing beside Asive's slender dark-haired companion. "What's your name?"

"Carlette. I'll do some trick riding with my horse when he tires of his routines."

"These people have no money to pay you."

She shrugged. "A little food, perhaps. We do not look for money."

"You're circus people?"

"I am. I went off on my own last month and met up with Asive a few weeks ago on the road."

"What makes a young woman leave a circus in the middle of Europe and go off on her own?"

She turned her large black eyes to study him for the first time. "You ask questions. Are you in charge here?"

"No, Gheorghe Langur is in charge. You met him at the stream."

Asive had finished his act for the children, and it was Carlette's turn. She pulled the pink garment over her head and shed her boots. He now saw that the bodysuit was spangled in the tradition of circus performers. She leapt onto the back of her horse, took a standing

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position and held it while the animal cantered around the children in a wide circle.

"This is so good for the children," Aurel Canno said, joining Michael with his own brood. "They have had nothing but gloom since we came here." A squat woman of around fifty had joined them to watch the show, and he introduced her. "Michael, this is Gheorghe Langur's wife, Monsella."

"Thank you for the food," she said, "and the carved animals for the children."

"My wife makes those."

"She is very talented. If you stay another night you must spend it with us."

"I'm planning to go back today," Michael said, "but I thank you for the offer."

Asive came on again following Carlette's riding, and once more charmed the children. This time he performed a series of simple magic tricks, bringing more laughter. When he'd finished, Michael went over to compliment him. "You're very good with children."

"Thank you, sir. Is this a permanent Gypsy camp?" His voice was oddly pitched, as if he might have injured his throat at some time in the past.

"The people have been driven from the nearby village. They wait here in a sort of limbo."

"So," he said, and that was all. Langur invited the two of them to stay for lunch and they agreed. Michael decided he should eat too, before starting the trip back. Langur's wife Monsella was already preparing some sort of stew in a large pot and he decided there'd be enough for one more person.

As they gathered for the open-air meal outside the Langur tent, seated on the ground as if at a picnic, another man came up to speak with the community's leader. "This is Rovack," Langur said. "He helps me in many things, and finds work in villages to the west."

Rovack, a muscular man a bit younger than Michael, grinned to reveal a gold tooth. "This morning I sent someone into Valeni la Posului to speak with their leaders again."

"What luck did your man have?"

"They are willing to send someone here this afternoon, to talk with you."

"Who?"

"Harken."

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Langur turned to Michael. "Harken is one of the village elders. A good man, but difficult to deal with. I'd like you to sit in on the meeting if you could."

"I am a Rom from another tribe, far from here," Michael argued. "I know nothing of your problems."

"You know that the villagers attacked us and burned us out. You know why. There is nothing more to know."

"Let me think about it," Michael said as Monsella arrived with her pot of stew.

The clown Asive sat across from him at the meal, and he was surprised that the man had not removed his makeup. "I was hoping to see your face," Michael told him.

Carlette chuckled. "I have barely seen it myself since I showed him how to apply the makeup. He travels with it all the time."

"I am an entertainer," Asive insisted. "In wandering the countryside we frequently come upon travelers or villagers to be entertained. It is best to be ready."

"Then you were not a circus clown, if Carlette showed you how to apply the makeup."

"I have been many things in my life. I have worked in a circus."

Michael did not know whether to believe him. He seemed a strange man to become a clown, an entertainer of children, but Michael had never known one before and perhaps there was a bit of strangeness in all clowns—or all entertainers, for that matter.

Monsella remained quiet during much of the meal, but her husband spoke of many things. He ate his wife's stew, and used his strong fingers to tear apart the rabbit she'd cooked. "All my life I lived in Valeni la Posului," he said, "until they drove us out. Now we are here, but for how long?"

"It is ironic that Carlette and I travel more than the Gypsies," the clown told him.

Monsella finally spoke as she brought them some special tea. "You could remain here a few days," she suggested, speaking more to the young woman than to Asive.

He seemed to think about it. "Perhaps. The children seemed to enjoy us. At least let us spend the night with you and put on another show in the morning."

At midafternoon the muscular Gypsy Rovack came to tell Langur that a car was approaching from the direction of the village. Langur asked Michael to join him in greeting the newcomer. They walked to the top of the hill to confront two men. One wore a suitcoat even

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in the late August heat. The other, younger and more rugged in appearance, carried an open shotgun in the crook of his arm.

"Hello, Harken," Langur said, holding out his hand in greeting. "There is no need for weapons here."

Harken was a white-haired man in his sixties, and Michael could smell the odor of mothballs on his suit. Perhaps he'd worn it last at a daughter's wedding. "We come in peace," he assured them, "but some in the community feared your people might avenge themselves for what happened three weeks ago. They insisted Rawl here accompany me. He is my son-in-law."

"The breech of the weapon will remain open," Rawl assured them, "unless some trouble develops."

Seeing no way out of it, Langur finally gave in. The four of them went down the hill to a special tent that had been cleared for the meeting. Most of the Gypsies they passed must have known Harken by sight, but none of them spoke. Michael saw Aurel gesture toward the shotgun, but he said nothing.

Inside the tent, Langur's wife brought them cups of water and then retreated. "Michael is the king of his tribe," Langur explained, "in Gravita, north of Bucharest. I have asked him to join in our discussion today."

"I am pleased to meet you," the white-haired man told Michael. "I can understand that what happened in my village would be upsetting to all Gypsy peoples."

"You drove innocent families from their homes and burned them out."

Harken shook his head. "Not me personally, or even the majority of the people. When they heard about the rape, a small number lost control and went on a rampage. We already knew of Tonio Bacau's past record, and this was more than they could tolerate. I think they would have killed him if they'd found him."

"There is no doubt as to his guilt?"

"None whatsoever. The young woman had seen him and knew who he was, and several people attracted by her screams saw him running from the scene. If Rawl had not arrived, he might have killed her as he did his earlier victim. My son-in-law fought with him—"

Gheorghe Langur held up his hand. "That is the past. We need to address the problem of my people here today. We have been driven from our homes and our livelihoods. We are slowly starving to death. The work and odd jobs we found in the community are no longer

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available because we fear to return to Valeni. Instead we go off in the opposite direction, finding a few hours' labor on farms to the west. It is not enough. We want to come home."

"Your houses no longer exist," the older man pointed out, not unkindly.

"We will rebuild them. Here is what I propose. You allow a limited number of my people to return to Valeni la Posului by day to work as they always have. If things go well for a few weeks, others could return and start rebuilding their houses. We would even place them a bit farther from the village proper if you wished."

Harken shifted uneasily and exchanged glances with his son-in-law. "It is a good plan, except for one thing. The rapist and murderer, Tonio Bacau."

"Tonio Bacau is gone. He fled the night of the attack."

"Some in our village believe he still lives among you. They believe you have hidden him here. Where is his hiding place?"

Presently they called a half-hour recess in the talks, and while Monsella served the visitors freshly picked fruit from nearby trees, Michael and Langur strolled along the bank of the stream. "Their charge is completely false, of course!" Langur insisted. "But how do I convince them of that? Bacau could be hundreds of miles away by now, and probably is. He would not be foolish enough to stay here."

"Still, you can see Harken's point. There are nearly three hundred people here, and plenty of places to hide."

"Two hundred are children or teenagers. Half the remainder are women."

"Bacau could be disguised as a woman."

"But we would know it!"

"Of course. The Rom would know it, but the villagers wouldn't. How could they sort out three hundred Gypsies?"

Langur skimmed a stone at some dogs digging near the stream. "There is one possibility I could suggest, if you would agree. You are a respected king from another tribe. Perhaps they would allow you to investigate our camp and establish each person's identity."

"That would take days," Michael argued.

"No, no—if everyone cooperated and came to you in family groups, it could be done in a day. I have a list."

"If Bacau is hiding here he could easily avoid me by moving from tent to tent, or even hiding in the woods for the day."

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The Gypsy king looked at him. "I have spoken with Aurel, who brought you here. He learned something of your life in Gravita and elsewhere. You have found many criminals and murderers, some within the Rom community. You could find Bacau, or convince the villagers that he is really gone."

Michael sighed and patted the man on the shoulder. "Let's go back and talk to them. If they'll agree, I'll do it."

Langur outlined his suggestion to the men from the village. Harken glanced once at Rawl but did not seek his opinion. Instead he told him, "Put down the shotgun, Rawl. You look foolish."

Harken's son-in-law closed the weapon but laid it on the canvas floor of the tent. Then Harken rendered his verdict. "This plan is agreeable if I am allowed to take part in the search along with Michael Vlado."

Michael glanced at Gheorghe Langur. "Agreed," he said sharply, without turning to Michael. The deal was done.

"When do we start?" Harken asked.

Michael shrugged. "We could do some preliminary work this afternoon and complete the actual screening of everyone tomorrow."

"That is agreeable. I will return to the village for a small tent and sleeping bags so Rawl and I can spend the night. We'll get started on it first thing in the morning."

As it turned out, Rawl was left behind while Harken drove into Valeni. Michael saw him at the top of the hill with his shotgun, strolling back and forth as if on patrol. "If Tonio Bacau is here, they don't want him to slip out before the search."

Langur grunted. "I'd better tell Asive and Carlette to stay another night. If Rawl saw someone in clown makeup trying to leave the camp, he might shoot him."

"While you're doing that, I should start my investigation at the beginning. If Bacau came to the village to see his mother, I should talk to her first. Where can I find her?"

Langur let out his breath in something like a sigh. Perhaps he'd been waiting for that question. "Right behind you. My wife Monsella is Bacau's mother."

As Michael listened to the stout gray-haired woman, the full story came out. She spoke quickly, nervously, using her pudgy fingers almost as much as her tongue. She'd given birth to Tonio when she was a girl of sixteen, not unusual among Gypsy women. The father had gone off after a few years, never to be seen again. Tonio was

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eighteen when he raped and murdered the daughter of a farmer who was employing Gypsies during the harvest. He'd served fifteen years in prison for the crime, released then only because of the amnesty program of the new government. Shortly after her son entered prison, Monsella had met and married Gheorghe Langur. Now, turning fifty, a peaceful woman in her middle years, she'd had her life disrupted by the return of her son.

"Fifteen years in prison," she told Michael. "And still in his eyes I could see the wildness of his father. From the first day he came to Valeni at the beginning of summer, I feared he might do it again."

"And he did."

She nodded. "A pregnant woman! Even as they were burning our houses I could understand their rage."

"When did you last see Tonio?"

"Before it happened. He must have run away at once, knowing he'd been recognized. That man Rawl was one of those who chased him from the woman's house."

"Did he come here after you were driven away?"

"No. We never saw him again. I think he is far away by now. I only wish I'd had a chance to say goodbye. Now I know it is like his father. I will never see him. He won't come back a second time."

"Yet Harken and the other villagers believe he is hiding here," Michael told her.

"Where would he be? Surely I would know my own son!"

"Do you leave the tent, walk around the camp?"

"Of course! I know everyone here."

She seemed to be telling the truth, and yet Michael knew that Gypsies could be good liars—especially a Gypsy mother trying to protect her only son.

"Harken may want to question you further," he said. Then, to Langur, he suggested they stroll around the camp. "I want to look for possible hiding places, so Harken can't surprise us with any sudden discoveries."

The two of them walked down the main line of tents, aware of the sullen children and the women in line for small rations of food. "We waste time searching for Tonio," Langur grumbled.

"When did you last see him?"

"With his mother, before the rape."

"Tell me what he looks like. I don't even know."

"Thirty-three years old, pale skin from prison, black hair, Gypsy eyes, clean-shaven, about five foot ten in height, one ear—right, I

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think—pierced for an earring, a missing tooth on the left upper side. I remember that because he was going to get a gold one as soon as he could afford it."

"Any scars?"

"A knife slash from prison on his right forearm, and a cut on the forehead, above his left eye."

The description, detailed as it was, would still have fit many of the young men in the camp. Only the pale skin was unusual, and the juice from berries could darken skin quickly. Michael stared at the faces as they passed, realizing that Langur might have been purposely inaccurate with his description. He would have to ask Harken or Rawl for their description later.

It was not long before Harken returned to the camp with another young man carrying his tent and bedroll. Langur saw the man, and the shotgun stuffed into the bedroll, and voiced his objection at once. "What is this? Another armed man? Are you trying to sneak into our camp like the Greeks with their horse?"

Harken's gaze was harsh and unblinking. "It's just as well that I brought him. While I was gone, Rawl found evidence of Bacau's presence in the camp."

"Impossible!"

He turned to his son-in-law, standing some distance away, and called out, "Bring it here!"

The rugged young man produced a plastic bag bearing the name of the prison near Bucharest. It was the sort of bag prisoners were issued upon their discharge to carry their few personal belongings. Inside were underwear, socks, and a small photograph of Monsella as a young woman. Within the folded underwear was a large Luger pistol.

"My God!" Langur gasped. "That's my gun! I thought it was destroyed when the house was burned. I bought it from an old German years ago."

"It appears that Bacau took it when he ran away," Harken said. "Rawl found it under the tree on the hill, covered with loose dirt. It shows he was here, and he would not have gone away without it. Do you have anything to say, Gheorghe Langur?"

"If he came here after we set up camp, neither Monsella nor I saw him."

Harken's lips tightened. "We will begin the search in the morning. For tonight, Rawl and his friend will patrol the boundaries of the camp. Warn your people that anyone who tries to leave risks being shot."

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The word spread quickly that men with shotguns were patrolling the area around the camp. First there had been one and now there were two, and some feared the dawn would bring a new attack from the villagers. Harken tried to put their fears to rest, pointing out that he was remaining in the camp overnight, sleeping in a tent alongside them. Finally things quieted down. After midnight, when Michael realized that Langur was still awake, he said, "Get some sleep. I'll stay awake for a couple of hours and make sure we're not slaughtered in our beds. When I get tired I'll wake you to relieve me."

The older man seemed relieved. "How can we repay you for all that you've done?"

"Wait until tomorrow. It may turn out that I've done very little."

Michael left him and went outside. There was a full moon, so visibility was good. Up on the hill he could see one of the villagers, seated with his back to the tree. Michael walked up slowly to join him, making sure to show that he came in peace.

"Hello, Rawl. Looking for more buried treasures?"

Harken's son-in-law grunted. "What do you want?" he asked, placing a hand on the shotgun.

"You don't need that. I'm an outsider. I could leave any time I want." He sat down beside the man.

"You said you would stay tomorrow and search for Bacau."

"And I will. First I'd like a description of him. I have one from Gheorghe Langur, but the man is his stepson. I want to make sure what he told me is accurate."

The husky man shrugged, taking his hand from the weapon. "A bit under six feet tall, I suppose. Dark hair and eyebrows, missing a tooth. He looks as if he's been in prison a long time, out of the sun."

"Moustache or beard?"

"No."

"Does he have a pierced ear?"

"I never noticed. I can tell you about the day it happened, though."

"Go ahead."

"The woman's name is Sarafine. Her husband was working and she was at home in her pregnant condition. Tonio Bacau had come to the house to do some painting. She lives down the street from us, and the first thing I heard was her screaming. I thought there must be a fire or something. I ran down there, along with some others, and found Bacau. She was still screaming. When he tried to get

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away, I threw a paint scraper at him and cut him about the eye. A couple of us jumped him then, and I thought we had him, but he fought like a tiger. He shouted that he wasn't going back to prison. Finally he got loose and leaped through a window."

"So there was no doubt as to his identity?"

"None whatever. It was Tonio Bacau. We'd all heard about his release from prison and his return to Valeni. We'd been watching him."

"But not closely enough."

"No," Rawl admitted. "Gypsies are sneaky ones." Then, remembering that Michael was one himself, he amended, "Some of them, anyway."

Michael sat silently for some minutes, watching the camp bathed in moonglow. Presently he stood up and said, "I'm going back to the tent. Be careful with that shotgun. You don't want to hurt an innocent person."

He slept for only a few hours. Sooner than he'd expected it was morning, and Langur's wife Monsella was rousing him. "Gheorghe says you must get up for breakfast. They'll be starting to check off the names in a half-hour."

Michael roused himself and ate the meager breakfast they all had. Then he went outside to find Harken and Rawl setting up a table and chairs that they'd brought from the village. Langur produced a handwritten list of all the families and their members—something he'd made up during their weeks in the meadow camp.

"We will call up each family in order," Harken said. "While their identities are being verified and their names checked off, Rawl will search their tents to make certain no one is hiding there."

Michael readily agreed to the plan. He was certain Tonio Bacau would not be uncovered that easily. Still, as he met the families one at a time he was careful to check off each member. Some were easy. Children and people very short or over six feet could be eliminated. Some others—men and women—were examined more carefully. Tall men in boots were requested to remove their footgear, and always Michael was on the lookout for a pierced ear or a scar above the eye. For men in their thirties, he demanded verification of their identities. This was not so difficult, as many still carried some form of government identification.

"Nothing in the tents," Rawl reported as the process wound down

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in the afternoon. Soon every name on the list had been accounted for.

"What about those two?" Harken asked, gesturing toward the spot where the clown Asive was juggling for the children.

"He's not my son," Monsella insisted.

"He could be. The height is about right." Harken turned to his son-in-law. "What do you think, Rawl?"

"Make him wash off the grease paint so we can see his face."

Michael walked over to Carlette. The dark-haired young woman seemed suddenly frightened. "We have no part in this. We are circus people, passing through."

"What harm would there be in removing his makeup, just to satisfy them? You could put it on again."

"The children— He doesn't want the children to see him." Her voice was almost a whisper.

"We could do it in a tent. They wouldn't see him."

"I—"

"Talk to him. Ask him."

She went over to Asive then, brushing his clown makeup gently with her fingers as she spoke. He listened to her words, but only shook his head. "No no no—"

Then, before Michael realized what was happening, the clown broke into a run, making for the stream. Harken and Rawl both yelled, but it was the Gypsy Rovack who scampered after the fleeing clown. "Don't hurt him!" Carlette shouted.

Rovack easily outran the running man, leaping onto his back and spilling him to the ground before he'd reached the line of stream-fed trees. Michael and Harken followed.

"Keep the others back," Harken told Rawl.

While Rovack held the struggling clown, Harken wet a handkerchief in the stream and came back with it. Rovack could not hold Asive's head steady, but Michael came to help. It must be done now, whatever the consequences.

The grease paint came away, and they saw at once the disfiguring birthmark that covered the right side of Asive's face. "Leave me alone!" he screamed. "What are you doing to me?"

Michael sighed and walked back toward the others. When he saw Carlette he called to her, "Come here and bring your makeup. Fix him up. He's not Bacau."

"Of course he isn't!" she shouted, pushing past him. "He's my brother. I left the circus to be with him."

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As he prepared to depart, Harken told Langur, "We had to do this. It was necessary to satisfy the fears of our people. I will meet with the others this week and ask them to allow Gypsy workers back into Valeni on a daily basis. If that works out well, it will be the start of something. Perhaps before winter comes you can begin to rebuild your houses."

It was cheering news for Langur and Monsella and the others. At least there was some hope now. They ate a hearty supper before Michael's planned departure, and there was singing and dancing in the camp for the first time since his arrival. Asive and Carlette watched for a time from the sidelines, and then he saw them slip quietly away with their horses, back across the stream the way they'd come.

"I must thank you for spending this time with us," Gheorghe Langur told Michael. "You have helped to bring the hope of renewal to my people. With the work in the village we will have money again. Our children will not starve. And by winter we may have shelter too."

"What will you do if Tonio Bacau returns?"

"I think we have seen the last of him."

"I do too," Michael said. "It's growing dark and I must leave soon."

"Stay another night. Start out fresh in the morning."

"I will go soon. Already I have been away from my wife too long." The sun was setting beyond the western hill and he added, "Come, let us walk by the stream before I depart."

"You have something more to tell me, Michael?"

"Yes. I think we both know where Tonio Bacau is hiding, and why he will never come back."

"Why is that?" Gheorghe Langur asked.

"Because you killed him the first night he arrived at this camp."

"A serious charge, and one you cannot prove."

"I can prove it to my own satisfaction, which is all that matters."

Langur was silent for a time as they strolled. Finally he said, "Go on."

"The fact that he came here is shown by the Luger pistol and other possessions Rawl found hidden beneath the tree, wrapped in a plastic bag from Bacau's prison. A Luger is a large, awkward weapon, difficult to conceal under one's clothes when meeting a mother who will no doubt embrace you. He took the weapon from your house before the villagers burned it, but his hiding it on the

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hill told me two things—he was heading for your tent to see his mother, and he did not leave the camp. Certainly he wouldn't leave without the gun and his few possessions."

"How would he know which tent was ours?"

"By observing from the hilltop at dusk, before people retired for the night. Once it was dark he came down to see his mother, no doubt hoping she would give him money or jewels to help his escape. But he found you first and you killed him, perhaps strangling him with those powerful fingers of yours."

"You dream this, Michael Vlado. It is a vision come to you in your sleep."

"No, in my waking." He picked up a stone and pitched it into the stream. "When you described Tonio Bacau to me, you described him as you'd last seen him. You mentioned a cut on the forehead, above his left eye. You denied having seen him since the rape, but that cut was inflicted by Rawl at the scene of the rape. To describe the cut, you must have seen Bacau later, at your tent, when you killed him."

"If all that is true, what did I do with the body?"

"Truly I do not know. But I remember yesterday as we walked along this stream, you threw a stone at some hungry dogs digging in the dirt. Perhaps that was Bacau's final resting place."

The hairy man sighed. "You are a devil."

"No, only an observer."

"I could not let Monsella see him again, not after all the misery he brought down upon her and our tribe. His action drove us from our homes, threatened to make wanderers of us once more. Who knows how many children he condemned to an early death? What I did was right. It was the only way."

"You might have told Harken the truth."

"And admit to Monsella that I killed her son? I could not tell her that."

They walked for a time in silence, and finally Michael spoke. "Nor can I. Your secret is safe. A form of justice has been done."

A weight seemed to have lifted from Langur's shoulders. "Thank you, Michael."

He left soon after that, driving through the dusk down the mountain road toward home. After about ten miles he found a level stretch and pulled off the road to sleep until morning. He'd had no intention of driving through the night, but it was always best not to share a tent with a murderer, even a benign one like Gheorghe Langur. ●

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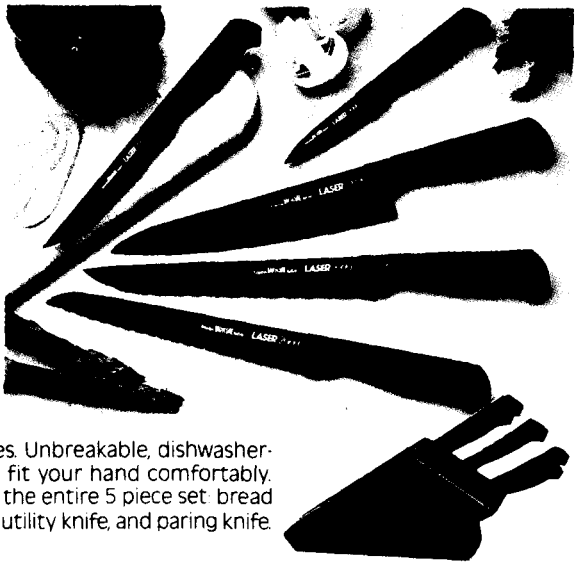
MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ CUTLERY: A CUT ABOVE THE REST



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▼ EVERYTHING BAG

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▼ FOOD FOR WOOD

Most of the convenience waxes you buy actually dry out wood instead of nourishing it. What's the alternative? Our choice is Williamsville Wax. It is made of beeswax and lemon oil, heat-blended with other natural oils. It can be used on any type of wood, any type of finish, on paneling or kitchen cabinets as well as fine furniture. Williamsville Wax is super for restoring neglected or mistreated wood. Two 8-oz. bottles cost **$13.98** ($3.25) #A14312.

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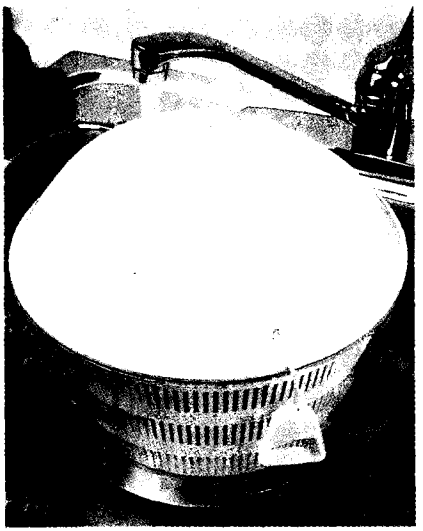

The Jet Spin Washer/Dryer for salad greens and vegetables, does a better job with less effort than any other method of preparation. As the stream of water hits the spinning inner basket, it bursts into spray, giving the contents a good drenching before being carried off by centrifugal action. Flywheel action keeps basket spinning with only a few gentle tugs. Spray wash coaxes dirt and grit from innermost lettuce wrinkles. Turn off the faucet and with a few more tugs the remaining water spins away, leaving you with crisp clean salad greens, so dry they are positively perky. Also works for fruits and vegetables. The Jet Salad Washer/Dryer is self-draining, splashfree. **$19.98** ($4.50) #A1520.

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

James Powell is an author of great versatility. Although he considers himself primarily a humorist, long-time readers of EQMM *will know that he is equally capable of writing in a sombre key. The following story provides a fine example of his range . . .*

THE FIXER-UPPER

by JAMES POWELL

Nothing is noisier than a vacant house. Floors crack like pond ice. Empty staircases creak as though built of old bones. A neighbor's toilet or teakettle sends thunder down the water pipes. And every sound finds its echo.

George Willows paused in the front hallway to listen. Even the silence whispered. How many ghosts had this modest little frame house accumulated over its hundred and fifty years? he wondered. Willows had grown up in the city, where ghosts were rare. He reasoned they must prefer small towns. Otherwise, the halls of the old apartment complex where he grew up would have thronged with ladies in white and groaning spectres and terrible apparitions. If he saw a ghost now, he told himself, he'd have to stop and stare as he had as a boy seeing his first cow.

Willows closed the door, pocketed the key, and walked back to the kitchen. He put the paper bag with his lunch in it into the emptiness of the old white round-shouldered refrigerator. Then he went up to the second-floor bathroom where he set the plastic tank of the portable sprayer under the spigot in the lion-footed tub. While the water ran he wondered if ghosts might have to do with ownership. Maybe only the deed holder and immediate family came back as ghosts.

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Maybe the ghosts of the renting dead had to be out by the end of the month.

When the tank was filled, Willows carried the sprayer and the long-handled wallpaper scraper up the hall to the front bedroom. He stood in the middle of the bare, worn linoleum for a moment to survey the job to be done. But instead he found himself thinking about all the people who must have died in this room, imagining the men staring at the ceiling, fretting over that water stain in the corner, resolving to have the roofer in when they were up and around. He wondered if the women found comfort or pain in dying in the same bed they'd come to on their wedding night and had their children in. And how many turned their faces to the wall and waited for death staring at this ugly wallpaper, or paper just as bad?

Shaking his head wryly at this dark train of thought, Willows went over and opened the windows to catch any breeze the still morning might have to offer. Once again his eyes were drawn to the house across the street. Whoever built the pretty little place had given it clapboard of three thicknesses in honor of the Trinity and tucked in a tiny fretworked porch beside the bay window. As always, the scowling old man was sitting there with his lantern jaw and large ears and knuckles, rocking back and forth on the metal glider. As far as Willows knew, Albert Kreider was the first murderer he had ever seen. If indeed the old man had killed his wife those many years ago.

In the few days Willows had been working on the house he'd never seen that glider across the street empty. No matter how late Willows stayed, when he left for home there'd be the glow from the old man's cigarette rocking gently in the dark alcove of the porch. And every morning Kreider would be back there again when he parked out front, directing Willows's thoughts toward death, ghosts, and, most recently, the question of the old man's guilt.

Willows left the window and went back to the sprayer. He got down on one knee and pumped the handle slowly and deliberately to build the pressure in the tank. It still pleased him to imagine how much he'd have to pay a contractor to do what he was doing. When the agency let him go during all the cutbacks he was better off than most. His wife had a good job. They had money in the bank. And with his work record, something was bound to come along. He'd already turned down a couple of offers that would have meant moving. He and his wife liked the area and there was her career to think of, too. So they decided it made sense to buy a second house,

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something small, something Willows, whose carpenter father had taught him well, could fix up for resale at a profit. And working for himself he'd be free to take off for job interviews or a little networking whenever he wanted. His brother-in-law, a lawyer who was always picking up property at sheriff sales, had put them on to the house in nearby Tedford.

Willows had learned that Kreider was a murderer from Sonny, the gray little man who clerked at Liddie's, the Tedford hardware store. He'd dropped by there right after settlement to open a charge account. Sonny was stocking shelves. He said Willows would have to speak to "her nibs," who'd just stepped across to the lunch counter for a minute. In the meantime Sonny offered to take down the particulars. But he put his pencil aside when he heard the address. "You're doing a fixer-upper on the old Showalter place," he said with the pleased look of a man who knows something you don't. "That means you've got Albert Kreider for a neighbor. Killed his wife Dorothy Ann in that very house forty years ago. I was arresting officer, filling in for Murray the constable who wasn't back from Korea yet." He offered his hand. "Everybody calls me Sonny. I don't like it much. But everybody calls me that, so you might as well, too. Yes, sir, I was first on the murder scene. And a bloody sight it was. Killed her with a straight razor."

Willows shook his head. He wasn't a violent man. He found it hard to imagine one person killing another, even though he knew they did. "Why?" he asked.

"Claimed he didn't," said Sonny. "Told a drinking buddy down at the bar that he'd popped her a good one for messing around with his things. But he swore to the state troopers he left her alive and kicking. Claimed a prowler must've done it. The police didn't buy that. All they wanted to figure out was, did he kill her during the argument. Or did he come back from the bar after brooding about it and kill her then. You know, premeditated."

"Premeditated murder?" asked Willows in disbelief. "Because she was messing around with his things?"

"I'm with you," said Sonny. "I think there was more to it than that." He tapped his temple with a crooked finger. "He'd gotten pretty quick with his fists with Dorothy Ann since coming back from Korea. And there was talk she'd been playing around while he was gone. But anyway, the police decided they'd had an argument over something and Kreider'd killed her then and there. Second degree. Like I said, there was a lot of blood. They figured he didn't have

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time to kill her and clean himself up between leaving the bar and my arriving on the murder scene. So he had to have done the job first, then cleaned himself up and gone down to the bar, pitching the razor somewhere on the way. Kreider served his twenty-five years and moved back to town."

Sonny leaned forward. "But like I said, I'm with you. And as for Dorothy Ann's gentleman friend, I figured it was Grover Hicks, the schoolteacher. Lives right up the street from your place. Hicks was her speed. Thinks his shit doesn't smell. They both hung out all the time in the town library back when we had a library."

"So did I," said the woman negotiating the front door with a paper cup of coffee in each hand.

"This gentleman wants to open a charge," said Sonny.

Liddie Dale was a small, stocky, sensible-looking woman with a square face. She introduced herself to Willows and, handing Sonny his coffee, she shooed him back to stocking the shelves. "Dorothy Ann's murder was the high-water mark in Sonny's varied career," she told Willows when the clerk was out of earshot. "Like the war was for most of the others. Did he tell you he arrested Kreider?" she asked, as she drank her coffee and read what Sonny had written on the pad. "Well, he didn't. The state troopers did the arresting." She looked up. "Not that it matters much one way or the other. Well, we appreciate your business, Mr. Willows. Anything we can do to make things easier, just give a shout. My father did a lot of the contracting around here. Raised his daughter like one of the boys, taught me a bit of everything. A Jill of all trades and a mistress of none. So like I said, just give a shout."

When Willows asked her to recommend an electrician, she led him over to a roll-top desk in a space under a staircase while she looked for the man's business card.

As Willows waited, his mind went back to Dorothy Ann Kreider murdered with a straight razor. It must have shown on his face, for the woman pointed to a picture of a high-school graduating class of thirty or so young people among the photographs above the desk. "My class," she said. "Three quarters dead or moved away. There's Dorothy Ann." She pointed out a pale young woman standing in the front row. "Grover Hicks used to say her skin was like the lily of the valley, white with a touch of blue in it. I remember when she giggled it looked like she was trying to stuff her shoulders in her ears. But she was no scatterbrain." She pointed at the picture again. "And there I am, old sourpuss next to her. And there's Grover Hicks

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right behind us. Dorothy Ann married Kreider pretty soon after graduation. She was in a big hurry to move away from home. Kreider was divorced and owned a body shop down by the bridge. You can still make out the name painted on the wall if you drive by slow and the weeds aren't up too high. Grover Hicks went off to teachers' college not long after, working for my dad summers and holidays to earn his way through."

She glanced over at Sonny. "But don't let certain people fill your head with nonsense, Mr. Willows," she said. "There was nothing going on between Dorothy Ann and Grover Hicks to spark a murder, believe you me. Every small town has a family that thinks it's too good for it. In Tedford here that'd certainly be Mrs. Hicks and her boy Grover. I guess you'd call Grover a little overbred. The men around here never cared for him much, and if there was any loose blame floating around, they'd lay it on Grover real quick. Albert Kreider, on the other hand, was a mean, brutal man, but they thought he was just jim-dandy. Can you beat it?"

After that they went through the store and Liddie Dale recommended some things Willows might need later on. "What's it going to be, paint or wallpaper?" she asked when they reached the wallpaper samples. "We got a real good line of wallpaper." She spoke as if she was afraid he'd go to Chang's Great Wall of Wallpaper outlet at the shopping mall.

When he said paint she nodded and said, "Figured as much. In my day paint was trendy, too. Among the younger crowd. You'd do your ceiling and one wall one color and the other three walls another. Heather and rose were a popular combination."

The design on the old bedroom wallpaper consisted of large white and silver flowers crowded onto a dull red background. If it was like the stuff downstairs there would be three or four layers underneath. Willows intended to soak the walls several times, taking all the time in the world to let the water do its work. Half the battle was getting the paper sodden enough. He turned the sprayer on and adjusted the nozzle and started spraying to the left of the bedroom door just below the ceiling. The water wakened the familiar astringent smell of the lime in the plaster. But it had a more startling effect on the wallpaper itself. Suddenly the red background brightened, grew brighter, and seemed to gush out at him, pushing the pallid flowers aside and turning the downward runs of water into trickles of blood. Willows took his thumb off the sprayer button in

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surprise and stared at the red, hemorrhaging wall. And it crossed his mind for a terrible moment that somehow this house had been infected by the awful crime of blood committed across the street.

Then the red background seemed to darken and retreat back behind the flowers as the water was absorbed into the underlayers of paper and the plaster. Willows took a deep breath and started the sprayer again, trying to tell himself that he was letting his imagination get the better of him. But, of course, there was nothing at all imaginary about the thing he'd found in the cellar.

A day or two after he started work on the house, Willows had been cleaning out the cellar, carrying armloads of window shades, stacks of old newspapers, and any other trash he could find out to the dumpster at the bottom of the yard. A bundle of cloth had been stuffed in alongside the soil pipe in the hole made in the stone foundation when indoor plumbing was installed. Willows pulled it out to see if it was something for the dumpster and found a moldy suit of green coveralls with "Al's Body Shop" on the back. They were stiffened in places by a large dark stain. Willows had no doubt that it was blood. At the time, he thought he'd found proof that Albert Kreider had murdered his wife with premeditation. The man had worn the coveralls when he killed his wife. Then he hid the bloody things over here and called for the police.

But premeditation or second degree, he'd told himself, what the hell difference did it really make at this late date? The man had served his time and another twenty-year term to boot in that fretwork birdcage of a porch. So his first reaction had been to throw the coveralls into the dumpster and forget about them. But the longer he thought about it, the more confusing it got. There must have been people living over here. So how did Kreider get in? Or did he have a key? And if he did, who gave it to him? And if he hid the coveralls here, why not the razor, too?

Around lunchtime of that same day, Willows stopped by the hardware store again, ostensibly to pick up the things he'd need for stripping the wallpaper. He didn't tell Liddie Dale about his discovery, perhaps because the coveralls raised more questions than they answered. Instead he asked, offhandedly, "Who was it, living in my house when Dorothy Ann Kreider was murdered?"

"Let's see," she said. "Old Miss Showalter passed away in the thirties and the Sloans bought it. Then old Carey. His grandson was the one who got sheriffed. Yes, that was it, Carey bought the house

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in nineteen fifty-two, but he didn't move right in. He was having Dad do the place over."

"So the house was empty," said Willows. "Anybody could've gotten in?"

She shook her head. "Dad was strict about us locking up on jobs." She waited for Willows to make his point. When he didn't, she said, "The way I remember it, the Careys wanted to move in by Christmas. It was a rush-rush thing." She waited again. Then she asked, "Well, your wallpaper scraping should only take a couple of days. Shall we start talking wall paint in case I have to order something?"

Willows went through the motions of going over paint charts but he wasn't listening to her. If the house had been locked up, then how could Kreider have gotten in to hide the coveralls? At last he asked, "Was anybody working there the night of the murder?"

Liddie Dale laughed. "My memory's good," she said. "But not that good."

That was the first time she'd told him something Willows suspected wasn't true. He wondered who she was trying to protect.

That afternoon while Willows was down by the garage tumbling the last of the rotted wood from an old garden shed into the dumpster, a man's well-modulated voice said, "I see you're making changes, sir." An elderly man wearing a tweed jacket over a well-worn flannel shirt was looking at the bald spot where the shed had been. The man nodded at the lilac bush in the alley. "I hope you'll spare this. It's the only French lilac in town. It is lovely. 'Woodman spare that tree. Touch not a single bough . . . ' "

" 'It something, something, something, And I'll protect it now,' " replied Willows. The man's little bow made him feel he'd gotten a passing grade.

"My name is Grover Hicks," said the man in the alley. "I'm your neighbor up the street. The Queen Anne with the widow's walk. I heard a nice couple had bought the Showalter place." Hicks had gray hair parted in the middle. His well-molded face was lined but not wrinkled. Several emotions seemed to flicker across it at any one moment like the reflection of moving water.

"Nice to meet you," Willows said. "Miss Dale at the hardware mentioned you were a classmate. You and Dorothy Ann Kreider."

"Ah, yes," sighed Hicks. "We had kind of a reading circle, I guess you'd call it. Dorothea, that was my name for Dorothy Ann. A joke between soul mates." He paused and added, "And Liddie was a welcome ballast to our high spirits. Dorothy Ann shouldn't have mar-

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ried that lout Kreider. How Mother laughed. But she was wrong. Dorothy Ann was a very sensitive person." He shook his head, adding, "Well, I'd better be on my way. The backyard gardens used to be lovely, so lovely that I got into the habit of coming this way. But now all you see are annuals."

It occurred to Willows that there might be a simpler reason why Hicks used the alley—to avoid Albert Kreider sitting out on his porch. So he ventured a small lie. "Miss Dale gave me a bit of our house's history. I understand you worked on it. Just before the Careys moved in."

Hicks sniffed. "If Liddie says I did, I probably did. I got through college working for her father." His eyes darted about as if looking for a place to hide until they came to rest under a hedge. "But now all you see are annuals," he repeated. "And a few forgotten lily of the valley growing under the hedges. They were Dorothy Ann's flower. If you wanted to buy her a little present, you could never go wrong with lily of the valley bath powder. The little things nodding there every spring are like ghosts from the past. Not that I believe in ghosts. Who would ever want to come back?" He spoke these last words most sincerely, adding with a small laugh, "Maybe that's one of Hell's punishments, having to come back, having to haunt things." Grover Hicks bowed again and went on his way down the alley.

Willows began his scraping over by the door where he'd started spraying. The scraper made a sound like a skate blade on ice as he moved it across the wall. In some places the paper was so heavy with water that all he had to do was get the scraper behind it and he could hurry it downward until the many layers slithered off onto the linoleum in a single piece. In other places the paper built up in corrugated piles in front of the scraper and fell to the floor like party streamers. It was a satisfying job, like painting in reverse, with each brush stroke clearing a swathe right down to the canvas. Willows gave himself over to it completely, forgetting Kreider, Hicks, and Dorothy Ann. Soon the linoleum was a shambles of bloody paper, leaving the plaster as bare and gray as a winter sky.

Willows reached the short wall between the two windows, pleased with the progress he was making. He was scraping downward from the ceiling when he discovered the penciled handwriting at eye level on the slick plaster. It said, "Thursday, December 10, 1952. It is snowing."

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Willows smiled, taking real pleasure in this contact with this other wallpaper scraper who had worked here before he was born. Then he noticed through the window that a wind had sprung up at last and the petals from the big horse chestnut on the corner which had been in full candle only a few days ago were blowing down the street, turning the gutters white. The coincidence made him shiver. And then he wondered something else. Could that have been the day Dorothy Ann was murdered? Quickly he ran the scraper down to the baseboard. But there was no more writing.

Willows moved over to the next wall. When the scraper reached eye level it revealed another line written on the plaster in the same hand. "If confession is good for the soul," it said, "why is there so little of it?"

This cryptic sentence sent Willows's scraper racing back and forth across the wallpaper. In a moment he had cleared a rectangle that framed the words that followed. Then he started to read again. "I make this public confession for all to read," the words said. "I killed Dorothy Ann Kreider. I didn't start out to. I loved her. I only wanted to say my piece, to tell her what I had not dared say before, during all the time we had spent together while he was away. I was here stripping old wallpaper, which is not thoughtful work. My mind was all on her. Once when the wallpaper fell across me, heavy as brocade, it was as though a queen had thrown off her robes for me to catch. The plaster beneath was like perfect flesh, lily of the valley and cool to my fingers. When I laid my cheek against it, it took my warmth as if I alone could give it life." Willows turned from the words and looked at the plaster carefully for the first time. It had an odd green cast to it, a permanent mold of some kind which made it resemble more dead flesh than living substance.

The writing continued. "By late afternoon a light snow started up, vanishing into the slick black street as it fell. It made me very lonely and I wanted to talk to someone, even someone years away, so I found a pencil and wrote the date. Then I sat by the window and waited in the dark. He always went out to the bar after dinner. When I saw him leave I crossed the street, knocked, called her name, and went inside, as I had so many times while he was off in Korea. She was crying, her eye almost closed shut where he'd hit her, his coveralls that she'd been sewing a button on in her lap. I was glad he'd hit her. I thought that would make what I had to say easier. So I tried. At first she looked confused. But then she threw her head back and started laughing. I knew I had to stop her before her

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laughter turned from surprise to contempt. I could never have lived with that sound in my ears. The straight razor was there in her sewing basket. Once I'd watched her use it to rip out the seams of an old coat she was doing over. I remember her making a face and telling me Al's father used it to trim his bunions. I snatched the razor up. God! God! Then I tried to stop the blood with the coveralls. When I couldn't I panicked. With the razor in the bloody bundle of the coveralls I ran back over here. The night was colder. My footprints were black and damning as I ran across the snow. But I didn't care. I huddled up here in the darkness waiting for them to come and get me. But of course no one knew she was dead yet. And when at last I got the courage to go to the window, I found my footprints had vanished beneath a heavy fall of snow. It was almost as if what I'd done had been wiped away. Then, standing there in the darkness, I saw Kreider weaving his way back through the snow with a quart of beer in a paper bag in the crook of his arm. He went up onto the porch and into the house. After a moment I heard the bottle crash to the floor and his voice cry out like a frightened animal. He burst back out the door. For just a second he stood there looking up and down the street and then he charged back inside. That was when I made my bargain with the powers that be. So now I have turned on the lights and I am setting my confession down here on the wall as I have promised. Outside I can hear voices in the street. I imagine the lights coming on and people hurrying out into the snow, pulling on their coats as they come. Soon the state police will be here. And if they look around and see the light and come up here, I'll be waiting with her blood on my clothes and my confession here on the wall. Then they will take me away and punish me for what I have done. But if they don't come, then either what I did was right or else fate, or whatever, for reasons of its own, has chosen to defer my punishment. In that case, I will wait until midnight. Then I will paper over these words and leave them to be found another day. This is the bargain to which I swear."

When he reached the end Willows was hearing the words spoken in the schoolteacher's quiet voice. He stood there for a considerable length of time, wondering what he was going to do. Something told him he shouldn't do anything at all. Was there any real point in dredging up the past at this late date? It wouldn't bring Dorothy Ann back to life or give Kreider back the time he'd spent in jail. Why not let things go along the way they were? Let Hicks fuss down the alley, feeling superior. Leave Kreider his porch and his scowl.

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Would exoneration mean anything to him? But, of course, as Willows knew, the answer to that question wasn't his to give.

Willows went downstairs, got into his car, and set off for the borough hall and the police, growing unhappier by the minute with what he was doing. On impulse, as he passed the hardware store, he pulled into its small parking lot. He would explain what he'd found to Liddie Dale. She was a local. She could help him decide what to do.

Sonny was behind the counter. "Where's her nibs?" asked Willows.

Sonny was at once solemn and eager to tell what he knew. "Dead," he said, in a voice moved by the word. "They found her this morning. In the bathtub. She'd slashed her wrists with a straight razor. The funeral will be the day after tomorrow. We'll be closed." He shook his head. "She was a great old girl."

It took Willows a moment to sort out these words. Then he realized how wrong he'd been. It was Liddie Dale who had loved Dorothy Ann and killed her. That must have been Hicks's secret. Maybe he'd come out into the street with his mother to watch the excitement the night of the murder, saw the light in the second-floor window where Liddie Dale waited, knew she was working there, and guessed the rest. But he'd kept his mouth shut because he feared her. Or hated Kreider as much as she did.

In sudden hindsight it seemed to him that the last time he saw the hardware owner she'd been trying to tell him that she was the murderer. Yesterday afternoon while he was finishing up downstairs the scraper had slipped from his hand and bounced off the radiator, breaking his last scraper blade. So he'd had to go down to the hardware to buy some more. Liddie'd been at her desk writing in her checkbook. "Paying off bills," she said, coming over to the register to write up his order. "I don't much like debts hanging over my head. One of life's great pleasures is getting out from under." Then she asked, "How's the work coming?" When Willows said he expected to finish the wallpaper today she looked at him the way Sonny did when he knew something you didn't know. "Good for you," she'd said.

Then, he remembered, he had told her he'd hired the electrician she'd recommended and thanked her for giving him the man's number.

Liddie Dale made a small smile as she handed him the order to sign. "Don't mention it," she said. "Maybe you can do me a favor sometime."

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Willows shook his head sadly. A favor? If it hadn't been for him, she might have died in bed instead of in a bathtub. And it was too late to do her any favors now.

Then Sonny said, "Hey, glad I thought of it. When I came in this morning her nibs had left me a note to tell you something." He looked around the cash register. "Here we go," he said, finding the piece of paper. "She said, 'Re the flat white latex for the walls, tell Mr. Willows I recommend lily of the valley. It'll cover a multitude of sins.' "

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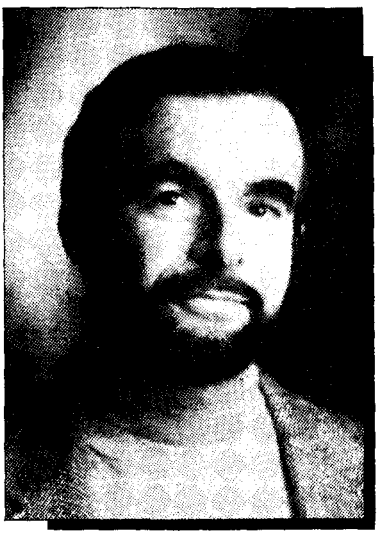
1992 EQMM READERS AWARD



Doug Allyn

Jo Bannister

A runner-up in 1989, Doug Allyn takes top honors in the Readers Award competition this year with first and third place stories. His first place "Candles in the Rain" was the subject of a letter we received from a reader immediately after publication. She wrote: "It is truly wonderful when a fiction writer can make strong political and social statements while spinning an interesting story that does not stoop to soap-boxing or maudlin sentiment." —Wonderful too when a story is set against a background evocatively constructed and peopled with unforgettable characters, and nowhere does Doug Allyn show these strengths more clearly than in his third place story "Icewater Mansions" (which

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has already been expanded into a soon-to-be-published novel by St. Martin's Press).

Doug Allyn is one of those rare instances of a writer who has sold virtually everything he ever wrote. In 1982, after more than twenty years touring Michigan as a rock and roll musician, he decided to try his hand at fiction writing—something he had always wanted to do. By 1986, he had won the Robert L. Fish award for best short story by a previously unpublished author and went on to receive three Edgar Allan Poe award nominations for subsequent stories. In 1992, his second novel, *Motown Underground*, was published by St. Martin's Press. A decade of rising success as a writer has not altered his lifestyle much, however. Doug Allyn's first love continues to be music, and along with his wife, bass player and singer Eve Allyn, he continues to tour with his band, devoting mornings to fiction and the rest of the day to rock and roll.

Jo Bannister was a newcomer to *EQMM* in 1992, and she takes second place in the Readers Award competition with a story outside *EQMM*'s usual scope. Several tales of ghosts, witchcraft, and other ghoulish goings-on appeared in our special Halloween issue, but "Howler" by Jo Bannister stole the show. "Howler" was one of three Jo Bannister stories published by *EQMM* last year, and it receives recognition from you at the same time that "A Poisoned Chalice," another of the three, has been selected by Edward D. Hoch for the 1992 volume of *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories*. An award-winning journalist, Jo Bannister lives in Northern Ireland, where she is at work on a new series of mysteries to be published by St. Martin's Press.

EQMM salutes Doug Allyn and Jo Bannister and the following fine authors who placed in the top ten in this year's balloting: in order—James Powell ("Ruby Laughter, Tears of Pearl"); Steven Saylor ("The Lemures"); David Dean ("Angela's Baby"); Peter Lovesey ("The Man Who Ate People"); Edward D. Hoch ("The Problem of the Leather Man"); John F. Suter ("The Touch of a Vanished Hand"); Edward D. Hoch ("The Eight French Dancers").

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Sports backgrounds have become more and more frequent in mystery fiction. While horse racing, auto racing, and individual sports like golf and boxing have long served as backdrops for fictional crime, team sports like baseball, basketball, and football used to be quite rare. Without doing a scientific study of the matter, I would guess there have been more mysteries with team sports backgrounds since 1980 than in the whole history of crime fiction to that point.

To the true sports mystery fan, the ideal book should be steeped in the subject activity, preferably with a climactic athletic event designed to intrigue the reader as much as the crime puzzle. Cortland Fitzsimmons took this approach in his enjoyable, if now quaint, sports mysteries: *70,000 Witnesses* (football; 1931), *Death on the Diamond* (baseball; 1934), and *Crimson Ice* (hockey; 1935), as did Herbert Resnicow in his various sports capers in ostensible collaboration with Fran Tarkenton (*Murder at the Super Bowl,* 1986), Tom Seaver (*Beanball,* 1989), and Pelé (*The World Cup Murder,* 1988); Paul Bishop in his recent soccer novel, *Chapel of the Ravens* (1991), and the present writer in the Jerry Brogan horse racing mysteries. Some of the best examples of the pure sports mystery include William Campbell Gault's boxing novel *The Canvas Coffin* (1953), the same author's golf-tour saga *Fair Prey* (as Will Duke, 1956), Robert Rosen's baseball novel *Strike Three You're Dead* (1984), Peter Lovesey's Victorian race-walking debut *Wobble to Death* (1970), Barbara Worsley-Gough's cricketing puzzle *Alibi Innings* (1954), and many of Dick Francis's steeplechasing novels, beginning with *Dead Cert* (1962). When the sport is just an incidental backdrop, however good the mystery is otherwise, the sports fan will suffer a slight letdown. Below are examples of both types, beginning with what may be the best basketball mystery ever. (Admittedly, there have been so few, that may sound like faint praise.)

*** Walter Walker: *The Appearance of Impropriety,* Pocket, $20. The novel follows a troubled season for the NBA's fictitious San Francisco Golden Gaters, with special attention to scoring star Del Fuego Dixon, Ivy League point guard Rynn Packard, and veteran center W.E.B. Pancake. Walker successfully accomplishes what editors often tell writers not to attempt: a mystery novel without a single focal character. The detective will prove as hard to guess as the murderer. The author, who has a good ear for athletic speech public and private, has fun with the conventions of player interviews and radio talk shows while juggling an inter-

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esting group of characters in a complex and unpredictable plot.

*** Geoffrey Norman: *Blue Chipper,* Morrow, $20. This is also a basketball mystery, intimately involved with the sport though describing little game action. High school player William Coleman is such a dominant star, universities will do almost anything to sign him up. Norman, who won a short-story Edgar for "Armed and Dangerous" *(Esquire,* 1979), moves his tale along familiar lines with considerable skill while offering some home truths about the sad state of collegiate athletics. Sleuth Morgan Hunt is Spenser as Southern good-ole-boy: he runs, hunts, lifts weights, cooks, practices interracial male bonding, and gets psychoanalyzed Susan Silverman-style by a wise and patient monogamous girlfriend.

** Michael Geller: *Three Strikes, You're Dead,* St. Martin's, $17.95. Private eye Slots Resnick is hired by the New York Mets to check out a promising prospect in Colorado. (Kudos to the blurb-writer for not giving away an early-revealed but well-managed surprise about the prospect.) Slots becomes embroiled in a complicated Ross Macdonald-ish mystery of small-town secrets that unfortunately has nothing to do with baseball. The book is competently done by a practiced pro, but some of the elements are overfamiliar. The pat ending is of a kind more associated with cozies than the mean streets. Geller's title is very similar to that of the Rosen book mentioned above, but I think Geller's version scans better.

**** Julian Barnes: *The Porcupine,* Knopf, $17. This deft and thoughtful short novel takes a semi-satirical but essentially serious look at the recent changes in Eastern Europe through the relationship of two men at the center of a criminal trial: Stoyo Petkanov, the deposed long-time president of an unnamed former Soviet satellite, and Peter Solinsky, the man entrusted with his prosecution by the new government. An acclaimed mainstream novelist, Barnes has written crime fiction as Dan Kavanagh.

**** Anne Perry: *Defend and Betray,* Fawcett Columbine, $18. The third novel about amnesiac cop-turned-private-eye William Monk and Florence Nightingale-trained nurse Hester Latterly continues one of the best historical mystery series. Barrister Oliver Rathbone is close to becoming a coequal third star of the series, and we see an extended example of his work in the Old Bailey. The crime in question seems initially comic—General Thaddeus Carlyon falls over a balcony and is found impaled on the halberd of a decorative suit of armor—but the story develops along very serious lines, continuing Perry's specialty of addressing vital issues of our day in a Victorian context. The only drawbacks are slightly excessive length and a resolution of Monk's memory loss that has less impact than might have been hoped—but maybe that story isn't over yet. (By the way, in the current book-pricing climate, this novel is a bargain.)

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**** Leonard Tourney: *Witness of Bones*, St. Martin's, $18.95. The Elizabethan husband-and-wife detecting team of Joan and Matthew Stock occupy another of the better historical series, of which this is the seventh. Drawn to London on a ruse, Matthew is framed for the murder of a clergyman, and Joan tries to find and clear him. As the villains are clear from the start, the only detection is of the inverted sort, but the couple's adventures while trying to be reunited keep the pages flying.

** Simon Brett: *The Christmas Crimes at Puzzel Manor*, Delacorte, $15. Disabled Scotland Yard detective Jack Tarrant and girlfriend Maria Lethbury spend a snowbound Christmas at Puzzel Manor, where they are challenged by a games-crazed killer. Doing a full-dress closed circle whodunit in the Golden Age style while providing the reader one puzzle per chapter is a tough technical challenge that Brett tackles ingeniously, but it would be misleading to claim this stunt novel gives the same satisfaction as a case for Charles Paris or Mrs. Pargeter. (Warning for lazy readers: Brett solves most, but not all, of the puzzles for you.)

** Alane Ferguson: *Overkill*, $13.95. The author of the Edgar-winning young adult novel *Show Me the Evidence* (1989) has produced an effectively written and constructed novel adults as well as teenagers can enjoy, a sort of high-school Mary Higgins Clark book. Likeable heroine Lacey Brighton is accused of a girlfriend's murder when her nightmare conforms to the facts of the girl's death. The plot is of the kind that mustn't be looked at too closely, and I'm sure many readers both young and old will spot the real killer early on, but Ferguson has the gift of readability.

A new trade paperback edition of Howard Haycraft's classic 1946 essay compilation *The Art of the Mystery Story* (Carroll & Graf, $15.95) includes a fine introduction about the book and its editor by Robin W. Winks. As a collection of key writings on the genre through the end of World War II, this volume is unmatched, and no student of the form should be without it. The same publisher continues its reprinting of Margery Allingham's short stories with the 1969 collection *The Allingham Case-Book* ($3.95), which includes a substantial biographical introduction by the author's husband, Philip Youngman Carter.

1993 by Jon L. Breen

ERRATUM: While we're on the subject of books, we don't want to let the opportunity pass to correct an error in the April "On Our Cover" piece about Tony Hillerman. Christmas gremlins were at work as this issue neared completion, but hold those letters please. We do know that the Navajo policeman featured in Tony Hillerman's superb novels is Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn (not Leghorn). If you are not already familiar with Mr. Hillerman's books, be sure to look for a copy of his last published novel, *Coyote Waits* (HarperCollins 7/90).

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Once in a while new talent is referred to us through authors we have previously published, many of whom teach courses for new writers. Such is the case with Katherine Romansky, who was a student of Miriam Grace Monfredo's at the Rochester Literary Arts Center. Two of Ms. Monfredo's historical mysteries have appeared in EQMM *and she has completed two novels published by St. Martin's Press. Ms. Monfredo also began writing fiction as a student at the Rochester Literary Arts Center, under the tutorship of Nancy Cress, a Hugo Award-winning science fiction author. In case you are not already getting the idea that Rochester, New York, has a flourishing literary community, think too of Ed Hoch, who has lived in the snowy city most of his life. Congratulations to Katherine Romansky on joining the Rochester ranks. . . .*

FOOTSTEPS

by KATE ROMANSKY

Somewhere behind me I hear footsteps. Until now I haven't been aware of anything except heat waves dancing off dirty city streets, and thoughts of Martin, my husband. I don't know when the footsteps separate themselves from the other Monday morning pedestrians on their way to work and become something special. But they do. Footsteps that keep time with my own, change pace, picking up speed until the cracked pavement beneath my feet vibrates. My brain registers the rhythmic slap of rubber on concrete. A jogger. Now the runner is beside me; out of the corner of my eye I glimpse brownish blond hair, a shade my mother calls dishwater, and breathe in the fetor of stale cigarette smoke.

Suddenly, a masculine hand reaches toward me. Thick, nicotine-stained fingers with broken nails hook my tooled-leather purse strap and wrench it from my shoulder. I try to hold on, but a sharp blow

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between my shoulder blades forces me to release my grip. He has my purse. I trip and fall, and the filthy city sidewalk rushes up to meet my face. One cheek grazes the curb as I land on hands and knees; in the gutter are cigarette butts, gum wrappers, used condoms, and other things in various stages of decomposition. I look up, pushing my auburn hair away from my eyes. All I see of my attacker, as he rounds a corner, is the back of his nylon windbreaker—it's navy blue.

Stunned, I try to catch my breath. None of the passing pedestrians offers to help; instead they move hurriedly around me, eyes averted. A car blows its horn. I've fallen dangerously close to the busy street and fumes from passing taxis and city buses assail my nose. Perspiration trickles between my breasts, and my ripped celadon-green linen suit clings to my body. I feel so vulnerable down here. Slowly I get to my feet. Both palms are bleeding and two nails are torn to the quick. My knees sting; I know they're badly skinned, that my new pantyhose are in shreds. Gingerly, I pick up my briefcase and hobble to the city courthouse a block away.

"Oh sweet Jesus! Pattie, what've you gone an' done?! Girrrl, you' a mess, bleedin' like a stuck pig!" LaTisha, our part-time receptionist, is a *full-time* NYU drama major.

I tell her I've been mugged and ask her to call the police. She helps me into a conference room, then leaves to make the call, returning briefly with a cup of coffee and wet paper towels for my hands and knees.

I sit on the old scratchy orange and brown tweed couch, my hands wrapped around a Styrofoam cup that is filled to the brim with steaming, murky brown coffee, and wait for the police to arrive. Something in my mouth tastes salty. Blood. I must have bitten my tongue when I fell. A deep tremor invades my body—a quivering I can't control. Someone asks how I feel. I'm not sure.

A burly uniformed police officer takes my statement, but his attitude tells me my report is a waste of time. All I saw of my attacker was his hair, the back of his jacket, and his hands. He could be anyone.

I ask about the chances of my things being recovered. The officer tucks his pencil behind one ear and rubs his forehead with the fingertips of his left hand. I stare at the plain narrow gold band that encircles his ring finger. "Lady," the cop says, "I wouldn't count on it, but stranger things have happened."

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After the officer leaves, a procession of secretaries, lawyers, and public defenders drop by to give social commentaries on how the city is going to hell. No one stays long. The district attorney, my workaholic boss, comes in to ask if I expect to take any time off. He reminds me that two and a half months on the job isn't long enough to take *paid* sick leave.

"Look Pattie," he says, "if you really *need* to go home—"

I interrupt him with a joke about my hardy Midwestern roots and send him back to his scruffy office, relieved that his overworked department won't lose its newest assistant D.A. for even one day. He leaves impressed with my dedication. What he doesn't know is that dedication has nothing to do with my decision to stay. Back in my partitioned cubicle, I close my eyes and allow my mind to wander.

Home. Home is an empty apartment. A week ago, on our eighth anniversary, Martin surprised me by tossing whatever he could fit into two suitcases and moving out, saying he'd call in two or three weeks to make arrangements for the rest of his things; last night I was served with formal separation papers—the first step toward the divorce he says he wants.

Just after the process server left, my mother called. She complained again about our move, nine months ago, from Madison, Wisconsin to New York, reminding me that we're throwing money away by living in such an outrageously expensive apartment; then she read a short article to me on the high incidence of crime in major U.S. cities. By the time she hung up, I was barely able to breathe. That's when I knew that I'd rather die than tell her about Martin and me. Now, this morning, I've been mugged. For God's sake, what have I done to deserve all this?

Off and on during the day I relive the attack. Why pick on me? What did *I* do wrong? Then it hits me. Damn it, the mugger has all my IDs: city employment card, driver's license, *and* apartment keys. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why didn't I think of this before? I call my super. He says he'll install new apartment locks and leave the keys with Jimmy, the night doorman.

At five o'clock I leave work, several hours earlier than usual. I'm beyond tired. My exhaustion is so total, I barely feel the aches I know are buried in my body. Later, when I'm alone in the dark, aches and pains imbedded in my tissues will erupt; the way deep purples and magentas have already begun to erupt on my skin.

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I can't remember getting home. All I want is to pick up my new keys, get into my apartment, and lock the world out; but Jimmy's not standing in front of the building's massive glass door. I find him a few doors down—tucked in a doorway, smoking a cigarette. This isn't the first time Jimmy's disappeared. He's not always reliable, but because he's friendly I don't have the heart to complain.

Inside my apartment I double-lock my door, toss my briefcase on a chair, and head straight for the refrigerator. I stop only long enough to grab an antique pewter serving spoon my grandmother gave Martin and me on our first wedding anniversary.

In front of the refrigerator I struggle out of my suit jacket, wincing at the pain in my shoulder, and pull a full half-gallon of double chocolate fudge ripple ice cream out of the freezer. I force the pewter spoon into the center of the carton and chip away at the hard-packed mass, wolfing down the frozen confection as fast as I can. Sweet, sensuous chocolate fills my mouth. An icy numbness spreads slowly throughout my body and seeps into my brain.

I turn from the refrigerator, bump my head against the open freezer door, and stumble into the bathroom, the frosty container clutched to my chest. Sticking the spoon in my mouth, I turn on the shower with my free hand. On the closed toilet lid, serving spoon clenched in a steely grip, I sit and rock, watching billows of steam fill the white-tiled room. Locked in. A prisoner in porcelain.

Warm moist air fills my lungs and my rigid body begins to relax. Melting chocolate ice cream runs down my left arm and oozes onto my fingers, the antique pewter spoon slips from my hand and clatters to the floor. Bent almost in half.

It's Wednesday, but Monday's attack still dominates my thoughts. I can't shake the growing certainty that someone is stalking me—hidden in a sea of strangers. I wish I had someone to talk to, so when I run into LaTisha at work and she asks how I'm doing, I tell her that I think I'm being followed. It's a mistake. She gives me a funny smile and says that maybe I could use some R&R. Later in the day I see her talking to one of the law clerks; when they think I'm not watching, they sneak a quick look in my direction. Now the whole office is probably talking about Pattie Seega and her *invisible* stalker. My head is killing me. I duck into the ladies room, toss a few aspirin into my mouth, and wash them down with tepid, iron-flavored water.

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Fear makes Wednesday's twilight trip home a nightmare. I work at telling myself I'm being foolish; I'm not being followed. The faces I see on the street are the same ones that have always been there. My pep talk doesn't work. The walk home takes an eternity.

Outside my apartment I hear the phone and race to answer it, leaving the door behind me wide open. I lift the receiver in time to hear a soft click. Trembling, I go back to close the door and double-lock myself in. That night, on my way into the bedroom, I push a small oak credenza in front of the locked apartment door, then spend the night in bed fully clothed, with all the lights on. Waiting.

Thursday morning I'm punchy from lack of sleep. A half block from my building I stop at a vending machine to pick up a copy of the *New York Times,* and hear someone come up behind me. I swing around, throwing out my arm, and knock down Mrs. O'Sullivan, the seventy-two-year-old widow who lives in my building. She's walking her ancient little Pomeranian. The dog tugs on the end of her thin rhinestone leash, snarling and snapping, her sharp, pointy teeth less than an inch away from my ankles.

"Oh, Mrs. O'Sullivan," I say. "Please forgive me, I . . . I didn't know it was you. Here, let me help you up."

Her heavily ringed hand pushes my own aside and she struggles to her feet on her own. "You must be insane!" she says. "Swinging your arms around like a windmill. I could have broken something, but I don't suppose you'd care. No consideration for others, that's your problem!"

I apologize again, but she's furious.

"Don't give me any of your excuses. You young people are all alike—always in a rush, always thinking only of yourselves. You almost gave my poor Lady Alexandria a heart attack." Scooping up her wheezing, rheumy-eyed pet, she holds it close and, with a gnarled, blue-veined hand, gently strokes the dog.

Mrs. O'Sullivan walks away from me, cooing softly into Lady Alexandria's orange fur. Tears fill my eyes. When I arrive at work I tell no one about Mrs. O'Sullivan, or last night's phone call; I refuse to add anything new to their gossip mill. At my desk, I take a deep breath and shudder; I know what I have to do.

That night on the subway ride home, my eyes ache from the strain of searching for the stranger with the dishwater-blond hair. At my building, Jimmy snaps a two-finger salute in my direction and calls the elevator down for me.

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"Hey, Ms. Seega, how're ya doin'?" I brush past Jimmy in his dove-grey uniform and rush into the elevator as soon as it arrives.

Once inside my apartment, I double-bolt the door and go into the bedroom. On tiptoe I reach all the way to the back of the closet's top shelf; my fingers catch hold of a battered Nike shoebox. I pull. The box tumbles down, spilling the black gun onto the floor.

At the kitchen table, I sit and quietly stare at the stubby metallic monster before me. I've been terrified of guns ever since Daddy shot himself to death, and even though Mother *says* it was an accident, I've never been sure. This gun belongs to Martin. He kept it a secret; I didn't find it until after he moved out. As soon as I found the gun, I called Martin's office to tell him I wanted the damn thing out of the apartment immediately, but he'd left for the day. Information gave me his new number and when I called, a woman answered. I hung up without a word—apparently Martin had been keeping more than one secret.

Now I'm almost glad the gun's here. After making *absolutely* certain it's not loaded, I practice firing the empty weapon and listen to the sharp, repetitious clicks it makes each time I pull the trigger. I take six bullets from their heavy cardboard box and set them up in a line, like little soldiers, on end, in front of me on the kitchen table. Bullets slip between my sweaty fingers and it takes nearly five minutes for me to load the gun. Loaded, it sits differently in my hand. Heavy, solid. I hold it up in front of me and catch a whiff of oil and something masculine I can't quite place.

Tonight's weather report predicts an end to the week's unseasonable heat wave; tomorrow's cold front will usher in temperatures in the mid-sixties. And rain. On my way to bed I put the gun in the pocket of my tan trench coat, slip the coat on over my nightgown, and run my hands along the pockets. The bulge is barely noticeable.

It's Friday and the beginning of a three-day weekend. I want to leave work early like everyone else, but a last-minute phone call turns into a major delay. When I finally leave the office it's dusk, and the predicted storm has arrived. Towering black thunderheads are taking over the sky. But I don't mind. The thought of a rainy weekend is comforting. I'll stay inside, curl up with Alice Hoffman's latest book, watch old movies on TV, and catch up on some paperwork.

Standing on the underground platform waiting for my train, I scan faces. The station is full, but not crowded. Out of the corner of

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my eye I see a movement. A man has stepped back and now stands half-hidden behind a poster-covered pillar. Was his hair blond? I can't see. I crane my neck and lean forward; maybe if I move closer I can get a better look.

A boom box blares. I jump. Seven or eight shouting teenagers with pink and green spiked hair and safety pins stuck in their cheeks and noses come running down the stairs just as my train pulls up to the platform. I step into the subway car and look around. There are no men with dishwater-blond hair.

On the train I stand, hanging onto an overhead tubular chrome bar, and sway with the motion of the rocking car. Billboards and graffiti blur as the train picks up speed. I let my eyes move casually over the people that surround me, looking for the man that's been following me. Did he get on the train? A different car? Maybe he's behind me. Stop it! I say to myself. This kind of crazy talk isn't helping. I've got my heart racing, keeping time with the clacking rhythm of the train.

Swirling colors begin to move less rapidly, becoming billboards again—offering advertisements for chewing gum, cigarettes, and velvety booze. Graffiti are obscenely clear once more. We jerk to a stop; I'm the only woman who gets off at this station. I run up a flight of stairs to the street and begin the long, six-block walk home.

A light rain is falling and clouds obscure the moon. Locked iron gates cover windows and doors of shops lining the streets; the streets themselves are deserted. It was foolish to leave work so late. Why did I take that last phone call? Wind-blown papers somersault down the sidewalk, then plaster themselves against closed storefronts. I tell myself to relax; I'm only a block from home.

Tiny hairs lift on the back of my neck. I have the feeling that someone is behind me. What was that? I listen. Nothing moves. Must be my imagination. No. There it is again. Footsteps.

I clutch my heavy briefcase to my chest and run, but my movement is hampered by a straight skirt. Dear God, if you get me home safe this one time, I promise I'll never wear a straight skirt again. A half block to go. Two doors. In front of my building, soft warm light from the lobby spills out onto the sidewalk. In just a second Jimmy will let me in. He'll swing the door open and I'll be safe.

Where's Jimmy? The heavy door looms before me. Empty. "Jimmy!" I call his name and pull the door open, racing across the lobby to the elevators. Tears roll down my face. Mascara stings my eyes. "Jimmy!" I scream his name and jab the elevator call button.

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I hear the elevator coming. Looking over my shoulder, I see a shadow fall across the sidewalk in front of the glass door. I punch the call button again and again. A man's arm comes out of the darkness and his hand grabs the brass door handle; the sleeve isn't Jimmy's. The sleeve is navy blue.

Elevator doors open at the same moment as the lobby's glass door. I trip into the wood-paneled box. Punching the close button hard, I pound on the button for the seventeenth floor with my other hand. The doors glide together. He runs for the elevator. I hear him slip on the highly polished marble floor; a harsh guttural curse and the pungent odor of tobacco follow me into the elevator. The doors are almost closed. His fingers stretch out for the narrowing gap. Too late. He pulls his hand back quickly, but not before I see broken nails and light-colored hair.

I slump against the elevator's rear wall, holding my breath —lungs ready to burst. I gasp, gulping down air and sobs. Hot tears spill onto my cheeks, into my mouth; I wipe my face on my coat sleeve. My hands shake so hard I drop my briefcase and clamp them between my knees.

Why is the ride taking so long? A mechanical whine, a sudden jerk, and the elevator stops. I press against the brass doors, willing them to open. Before the doors part fully, I push my way through, deserting my briefcase in the elevator, and run down the long, dimly lit corridor.

Dumping the contents of my purse on the welcome mat in front of my door, I paw through the jumble for my keys. That's when I hear it. Above the pounding of my heart. The second elevator has arrived on seventeen.

I insert a key in the first lock; the tumblers release. I hear the elevator doors open. The second key won't slide into the new deadbolt lock. I force it and all the keys drop to my feet. Oh Mother of God, please help me! I scoop them up and start again. Fingers stiff and cold.

Footsteps. He's coming. The deadbolt releases. I twist the knob. Push on the door. A heavy hand lands on my shoulder.

"No!" I cry. Wrenching free, I turn to face my attacker, with teary unfocused eyes. He's big. His face doesn't register, but the smell of cigarette smoke is overpowering. His lips move, but I can barely hear him over the blood pulsing in my ears.

"Hey—I bet I got somethin' on me that's gonna make you one *very* happy lady."

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He's grinning, and reaching into his windbreaker. I follow his hand with my eyes. There's a glint of metal. My hand plunges into my coat pocket and suddenly I'm holding the black stubby gun between our two bodies. His eyes widen.

Four loud staccato pops rupture the silence in the hallway. The man's body slams against the wall opposite my door; then slides to the floor, leaving a crimson streak on the wall. I drop the gun and put my hands over my ears. I run down the hall, pounding on doors, calling for help. No one answers. Why won't anyone help? I run back to the elevators.

The brass elevator doors open onto the lobby and Jimmy's face floats toward me. He's saying something. I catch one word. Cop. Yes, yes. I grab his arm. Call the police. What's the matter with Jimmy? Why is he pulling away? Shaking his head.

"Ms. Seega, slow down," Jimmy says. "Whatever it is, it's gonna be okay. I just sent a cop up ta your apartment. You musta just missed 'im."

No, Jimmy, I didn't miss him. Not even once.

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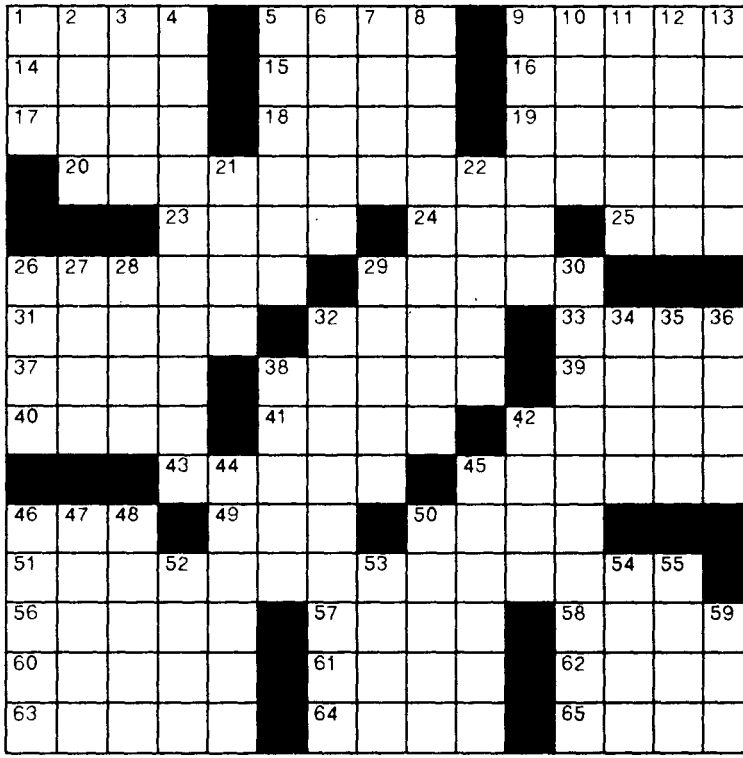
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 155

HOCH'S HEROES

ACROSS

1 Rebuff
5 New Mexico resort
9 Conflict
14 Repose
15 Seven, comb. form
16 One of 8 down lodged here would be fatal
17 Layer
18 —— saw Elba
19 Spring's sign
20 Hoch hero
23 Homophone of 22 down
24 Conger
25 Legal matter

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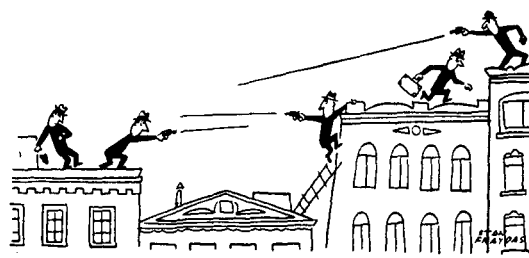
26 Lord Peter's valet
29 Kind of throat
31 Indolent
32 Pharaoh of the XIXth dynasty
33 Norwegian saint
37 Prima donna
38 Daughter of Oceanus
39 Actress Thompson
40 Sports page info
41 Strays
42 Aquatic mammal
43 "—— Written in a Country Churchyard," Gray
45 Stoat
46 Id's partner
49 Courier's best
50 Lhasa ——
51 Hoch hero
56 Requested concession, slang
57 Internat'l. group
58 Narrated
60 —— in the neck, an irritation
61 Found in ski country
62 Part of E.S.G.
63 Snare again
64 Lancelot and Galahad
65 River in the Netherlands

DOWN

1 Prepared for action
2 Secular
3 Cruising
4 Commit (a crime)
5 Up in ——, undecided
6 Lofty nest
7 Disengaged
8 Weapons
9 Actress Lombard
10 A noose has one
11 Shaded retreat
12 Arrangement of steps
13 "The Tree of ——," Ruth Rendell
21 Weight allowance
22 Weird
26 Commands
27 One
28 Gulf of Finland feeder
29 Press together
30 Source of vital information
32 Cribb and Velie
34 Sequential notes
35 Port in Southern Yemen
36 Journey
38 Hardwood timber tree
42 Bear over Bologna
44 Synonym for 43 across
45 Spartan magistrates
46 Literary award
47 Complain
48 Founder of Ottoman Empire
50 Fragrant oil
52 Mme. Maigret's friend
53 Indian tribe of Mexico
54 Mrs. Charles
55 Ms. Cinders
59 —— Moines



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Many an idea for fiction is sparked by an article in the newspaper. In Ms. Meier's new story, age-old family jealousies are ignited by a new, and unsuspected, type of crime that the author read about in the newspaper. . . .

LOST IN THE MAIL

by LESLIE MEIER

"The oddest thing has happened," announced Gertrude Becker to her sister Irma. The two elderly women were sitting at the sunny kitchen table in the big old house on Walden Avenue. They had grown up in the house and lived their entire lives within its walls, along with Momma and Poppa. Of course, there had just been the two of them since Momma and Poppa passed away during the Carter years.

"My Social Security check hasn't come yet this month," Gertrude continued, spooning out a generous portion of stewed prunes from a Pyrex refrigerator dish.

"It's rather late, isn't it?" said Irma. "Today's the eighth."

"No, it's the seventh," corrected Gertrude.

Irma knew perfectly well it was the eighth, and a glance at the Speedy Oil Delivery Service calendar on the wall confirmed it, but she didn't argue with Gertrude. Sixty-odd years as a younger sister had convinced her that Gertrude was right even when she was wrong.

"Have you checked with the post office?" asked Irma.

"I have not," answered Gertrude in no uncertain terms. "Whatever would Poppa think?"

Poppa had been a postman, and proud of it. The incorruptibility of the postal service had been a tenet of faith in their family. He had always insisted that, contrary to popular belief, very few pieces of mail were ever lost. "If it's properly addressed, it will get there," he used to say as he tamped down his favorite Prince Albert tobacco in his pipe with his broad thumb. "And even if it's not, chances are it will be delivered, too."

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"What about the Social Security office? Did you call them?"

"That's the funny thing," said Gertrude. "They say it was mailed and cashed. What do you think of that?" Gertrude fixed her rather large, watery blue eyes on her little sister.

"Probably a computer error," said Irma, placidly stirring her coffee. "When things go wrong, it's usually the computer."

"Are you sure *you* don't know anything about my check?" said Gertrude, eyeing Irma rather suspiciously. She knew that people outside the family thought the two Becker girls looked quite remarkably similar, and often mistook one for the other. Irma would have had no difficulty at all cashing a check made out to Gertrude, even at the local bank.

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Irma, her voice rising defensively. "I don't know anything about your check." She shook her head self-righteously, bouncing her carefully permed curls.

Gertrude was not convinced. She'd seen that look on Irma's face before, most notably in 1944. Then, as now, Irma had expressed ignorance of a missing item. Then it had been a pair of silk stockings, Gertrude's very last pair, and they had turned up in the laundry hamper a day or two later, completely ruined.

Then, as now, Gertrude had been convinced that Irma wasn't telling the truth. Last time, when she'd borrowed the stockings and gotten runs in them, she'd gotten away with it. This time, Gertrude was determined to get even.

When the mail came later that day, Gertrude wasn't home. As always on Tuesdays, she was out playing bridge. She was an extremely keen player and never missed a meeting of her usual foursome. So, when Irma heard the flap on the mail slot bang shut, she hurried out to the hall and picked the letters out of the wire basket that hung on the inside of the door. There were only three letters and she placed two of them, the electric bill and a postcard from cousin Emily, on the hall table for Gertrude. The third, from MasterCharge, was addressed to her. It was a bill, and she was very shocked indeed when she saw the balance due was nearly three hundred dollars. Quickly scanning the bill, she saw an item of jewelry had been charged to her account at Leroy's on Main Street.

Irma knew for a fact that she had not charged anything at Leroy's. The last time she had even been in Leroy's was nearly a year ago, when she bought a silver-plated Revere bowl as a wedding present for Margery Knight's oldest son, Stephen. Not only had she not

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bought anything in Leroy's, she hardly ever used her charge card. She preferred to pay cash, but carried the card in case of an emergency.

Perhaps the card had been stolen, she thought. Panicked, she rushed over to the hall clothes tree where she usually left her purse. The card, however, was safe in her wallet.

Irma could think of only one person who could have borrowed her card and then returned it, and that was Gertrude. Hadn't Gertrude been complaining this very morning that her Social Security check hadn't arrived? Wouldn't the missing check leave her rather short of funds?

Irma suddenly felt a bit dizzy and sat down on the hall chair. She knew Gertrude considered her disorganized, and often said she had no head for figures. It would be just like Gertrude to take advantage of her, to assume that she would pay the bill without questioning it. After all, Gertrude had never been shy about helping herself to the household money.

"I seem to have run a bit short this week," she used to say, pulling a five-dollar bill out of the cookie jar. "I just need a little loan until payday."

Of course, she would have had plenty of money to get through the week except for her habit of splurging on unnecessary luxuries. She would spend her lunch money and carfare on new shades of lipstick and nail polish, and earrings, and rings. Always vain of her hands, Gertrude had a special weakness for rings.

Irma had never actually counted the money Poppa put in the cookie jar for household expenses, so she didn't know for certain how much Gertrude actually borrowed. She did doubt that Gertrude ever paid it back, however. Although she'd seen her take money out of the cookie jar often enough, she'd never seen her put any in.

Checking the bill, she saw the jewelry had been charged last Tuesday. She could just imagine what had happened. On her way to play cards, Gertrude had probably passed Leroy's and saw an attractive bauble in the window. She'd been unable to resist the temptation of wearing a new ring to the bridge game, and being short of funds, she charged it to her sister's account.

Irma's jaw stiffened, and her hand tightened around her purse. This time, she decided, Gertrude wasn't going to get away with helping herself to the cookie jar.

* * *

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At dinner that night the two sisters eyed each other warily over the pot roast and mashed potatoes.

"That's a new dress, isn't it?" asked Gertrude, spooning out some peas. A large topaz ring glinted on her finger, Irma noticed. It must be new, she decided, as she'd never seen it before.

"Yes, I bought it on sale at Muller's," admitted Irma, self-consciously smoothing the collar. "Isn't that a new ring?"

"A gift from an admirer," said Gertrude, waggling her fingers and winking at her.

On Wednesday mornings Irma usually did a little light housekeeping and dusted the living room and the dining room. As she flicked the duster over the sideboard she cast a disapproving glance at the collection of pill bottles Gertrude kept there. Irma, who rarely took an aspirin, considered Gertrude a dreadful hypochondriac.

What an incredible array of pills she had, thought Irma, taking a closer look. Pills for sleeping, for diarrhea, for constipation, for heartburn, for sinus pressure, for arthritis, for anxiety. As she examined the various prescription and over-the-counter medications, Irma realized quite a few of the tablets looked very similar. What would happen, she wondered, if the little white pills Gertrude was supposed to take three times daily before meals got mixed up with the little white pills she was advised to take as needed for anxiety. Well, she thought, replacing the oversized easy-open caps, we'll soon find out.

If she had stopped to look in the hall mirror, Irma would have seen a rather nasty smirk on her face, but she was in too much of a hurry. Wednesday was her day at the hairdresser's and she had a standing ten o'clock appointment. She was running late, she realized, and hurried to put on her hat and coat before calling out a hasty goodbye to Gertrude.

Down in the cellar, Gertrude heard Irma leave. She was sorting the laundry, as she always did on Wednesdays. Soon after she retired from her job at the Dime Savings Bank, the two sisters had divided the household chores. Irma was responsible for cooking and cleaning; Gertrude did the laundry and maintained the yard.

Gertrude took pride in producing a clean wash and sorted the soiled clothes into three piles: whites, darks, and in-betweens. Noticing Irma's new dress, she checked the care label for instructions and learned that it was made of rayon. "Hand wash in cool water only," it said. "Cool iron as needed." She didn't hesitate for even a second

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before throwing the dress into the steaming washing machine. After all, she reasoned, since Irma had paid for the dress by stealing her Social Security check, it was really her dress and she could do whatever she wanted with it. She would just tell Irma she'd made a mistake. Irma would have no recourse. After all, anyone can make a mistake.

Climbing back upstairs, Gertrude checked to see if the mail had come yet. It was well past the usual time, but the basket was empty. How odd, she thought, there's always some mail, even if it's just unwanted advertisements and charitable appeals. If she didn't know better she would have suspected someone of tampering with the mail, but thanks to Poppa she knew such a thing was impossible. The postal service was incorruptible. Only one person could be tampering with the mail, and that person must live inside the house with her. If only she knew how Irma was doing it.

Hearing Irma's key in the lock, Gertrude felt rather anxious, so she hurried into the dining room and took one of her little white pills. Waiting for it to take effect, she took a deck of cards out of the sideboard and sat down at the table, laying out a game of solitaire. She smiled rather nastily to herself as she slapped down the cards; she couldn't help gloating over Irma's dress, which was sure to be completely ruined. She couldn't wait to see her sister's reaction.

In the hallway, Irma admired her hairdo in the mirror, then checked the mail. She was surprised to see the hall table completely bare and checked the basket. It was empty, too.

"Isn't there any mail?" she asked.

"No," said Gertrude, giggling nervously.

"That's odd," said Irma, licking two fingers and twisting a wayward curl into place. She then looked straight at Gertrude. "If I didn't know better, I'd think someone was stealing it."

Dinner that night was not a pleasant meal. Irma had discovered the spoiled dress and was furious with Gertrude. In a fit of pique, she grated an entire bar of Ex-Lax and sprinkled it on Gertrude's slice of chocolate cake.

"It will serve her right," said Irma, tucking the wrapper away in her pocket.

For her part, Gertrude was feeling unaccountably edgy. She had taken a second anxiety pill, but it didn't seem to do any good. Nervous as she was, she couldn't face eating at the same table with Irma, so she made herself a tray and carried it into the living room, where

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she ate alone. She had barely finished dessert, her favorite chocolate cake, when she was seized by horrible cramps and had to rush upstairs to the bathroom.

Staggering into the kitchen sometime later for a glass of ginger ale, she was disconcerted to see Irma sitting at the kitchen table, assembling a jigsaw puzzle.

"Is it diarrhea, dear?" asked Irma, neatly tucking a piece of sky into place. "Or is it a case of the wash-day blues?"

"What do you mean?" asked Gertrude, taking a swallow of soda.

"Oh, nothing," answered Irma, reaching into her pocket for a tissue. She didn't notice the Ex-Lax wrapper, which tumbled to the floor, but Gertrude did and understood all. Acting on impulse, she emptied the glass of ginger ale on Irma's new hairdo. She then marched into the dining room, chuckling merrily, and helped herself to a double dose of sleeping pills before going up to bed.

The next morning when Gertrude got up she found Irma on her knees in the living room, putting down a dividing line of shiny aluminum-colored duct tape.

"It will be better this way," she told Gertrude. "You can have half the living room, half the dining room, and all of the cellar. I will also have half the living room and dining room, plus the entire kitchen. This way, as long as we stick to our sides of the tape, we won't have to talk to each other."

"Fine with me," said Gertrude. "But I would like a cup of tea."

"There's no need to talk. Just write it down," said Irma, handing her a pad of paper and a pencil.

"Tea," wrote Gertrude, giving Irma a meaningful glance. Irma scurried off to the kitchen. Her hair looked terrible, Gertrude noticed with some satisfaction.

Since it was the seventeenth and she was expecting a dividend check, Irma didn't want to leave the house before the mail came. She was convinced Gertrude would steal the check if given half a chance. On the other hand, however, she had to do something about her hair, which had lost its curl and was sticky, too, thanks to the ginger ale. The only available appointment was at ten-thirty and she took it reluctantly.

The mail hadn't arrived when it was time to go, so she made a point of telling Gertrude that she was expecting the check. "I should get a NYNEX check today," she wrote on her pad and presented it to Gertrude.

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Gertrude merely raised an eyebrow and nodded. Irma left for her appointment, determined that Gertrude would pay dearly if the check wasn't there when she returned.

Watching her sister move briskly down the walk and onto the sidewalk, Gertrude suddenly realized how she was stealing the mail. So that's how she does it, she thought, she meets the mailman casually on the street and tells him she'll take the mail. Poppa, she knew, would never have fallen for such a ruse, but she had no such certainty about their mailman, a handsome fellow who seemed impossibly young for such a responsible job.

When Irma returned home that afternoon, she immediately checked the hall table and the basket for the mail. Both were empty.

This is really too much, she decided, tapping her fingers on the hall table. What sort of fool did Gertrude think she was? First she'd used her charge card, and positively flaunted the new ring. Did she really think she wouldn't notice? Now she was stealing the check, even though Irma had told her she was expecting it. This was a deliberate provocation, just as deliberate as ruining her new dress and pouring the ginger ale on her hairdo.

But then, Gertrude had always underestimated her, and had always bullied her. Standing alone in the hallway, she could still feel Gertrude's hot breath on her ear, and the painful wrench of her arm as Gertrude twisted it behind her back. "Don't you dare tell," Gertrude had hissed in her ear, and Irma never had. For all she knew, Gertrude still had a secret cache of comic books under her bed.

As the smaller, younger sister she'd never had the courage to confront Gertrude, or to disagree with her. Her cheeks burned as she remembered Gertrude giggling with her friends, telling Irma she couldn't play because she was too little.

It was as if she'd spent her entire life being bossed around by Gertrude. Always at home, scrubbing and cooking, taking care of Momma and Poppa while Gertrude flitted about free as a bird. Gertrude had attended night classes, she'd gone to work at the bank, she'd even spent a week in California. All that time Irma had practically been a slave, fetching and carrying for Momma and Poppa.

Enough is enough, decided Irma. She'd come to her senses late, she realized, but better late than never. She was through kowtowing to Gertrude and the sooner Gertrude knew it the better. Irma pulled an umbrella out of the hall stand, took a deep breath, and straight-

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ened her shoulders. She was going to find Gertrude and have it out with her, once and for all.

From her vantage point at the top of the stairs, Gertrude looked down on Irma in the hall. She wondered what Irma was thinking. She'd always been a sly one, remembered Gertrude, always ready to run and tattle to Momma and Poppa. Irma could do no wrong, she'd always been their favorite. And why not? She'd been the youngest, always cute as a button with her Shirley Temple curls and dimples. She'd never been awkward or ungainly like Gertrude, never suffered with allergies and acne.

No, Irma had always been the favorite and had been protected and sheltered by her doting parents. While Gertrude had been encouraged to go out and get a job to increase the family income, no such demand had been placed on Irma. Irma was considered too delicate to work outside so she'd stayed at home, cosseted, while Gertrude shouldered the task of bringing home the bacon.

And how had Irma paid her back? By stealing her Social Security check and poisoning her with Ex-Lax! She also suspected she'd tampered with her pills, which seemed to be having most unusual effects. Gertrude's fingers tightened on the belt she was holding; it was one of Poppa's. Watching as Irma armed herself with the umbrella, Gertrude shrank back against the wall and raised the hand holding the belt. She was ready.

After searching the downstairs and finding no sign of Gertrude, Irma decided to look for her upstairs. She began climbing the stairs as quietly as possible, adjusting her grip on the umbrella. When they were little girls, Gertrude had often hidden in the alcove at the top of the stairs, waiting to jump out at her. She wouldn't be at all surprised if Gertrude was in the same spot today, and she knew just what to do.

Reaching the last step from the top but one, Irma paused for a second before lunging and thrusting the umbrella into the alcove. Gertrude had anticipated her attack, and defended herself by using the belt as a flail. Caught off balance, Irma felt herself falling and grabbed wildly at Gertrude, fastening her hands like pincers on her sister's stringy old arms.

Struggling to free herself from Irma's grip, Gertrude felt her heel slip on the umbrella, which had fallen to the floor. She let out a thin, high-pitched cry as her feet went out from under her and she

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began tumbling down the stairs. Realizing what was happening, Irma released her grip on Gertrude and groped for the sturdy oak banister. It was too late, she was unable to save herself, and both women fell down the stairs. Their bodies lay on the hall carpet where they landed, twisted and tangled together just as they had fallen.

Some hours later Brian Madden, the paperboy, rang the doorbell. It was collection day, so he rang several times before giving up. He finally decided no one was home, folded the paper, and shoved it through the mail slot. It fluttered to the floor, landing within easy reach of both women, but they would never read the lead story.

MAIL THEFT SOLVED

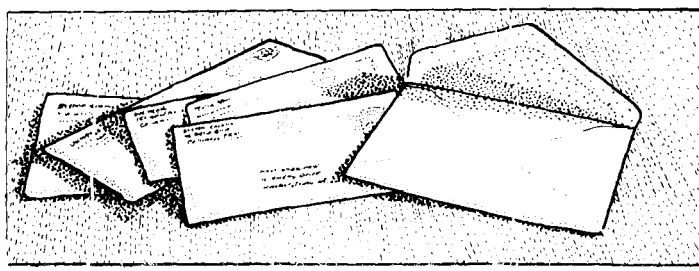
Middletown. Police arrested Earl F. Smootz, 53, early this morning following a month-long investigation. Local police and postal service officials allege Smootz stole more than 200,000 pieces of mail over a three-month period.

"His apartment overlooked the post-office loading dock," explained Police Chief Charles Reinhardt, Jr. "It was quite easy for him to observe the deliveries and steal the letters when no one was looking." Reinhardt said thousands of pieces of opened mail were found in Smootz's apartment.

"He was mostly interested in cash and checks which he found in the letters, but he also stole charge cards issued to local citizens," said Reinhardt. "Thousands of dollars in cash and merchandise from local stores were also found in Smootz's apartment," he said.

Reinhardt said the success of the investigation would not have been possible without the cooperation of Postmaster Willard Grinder.

"Customer complaints of missing checks and unexplained charges alerted us to the problem," said Grinder. "Contrary to popular belief, very little mail is actually ever lost." He also thanked postal customers for their patience and promised the stolen letters will be delivered as soon as possible.



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Describing her own background, Charlotte Hinger says that she has always been "rooted in American agriculture," growing up on a farm in eastern Kansas and later moving to the western part of the state where her husband owns a livestock trucking line. With farm life in her blood, it is not surprising that she is able to write so convincingly about the world of country music. . . .

THE FAMILY ROSE

by CHARLOTTE HINGER

Maybelle Rose's eyes swept across the girl with contempt, but she reached for the autograph book and signed it with a quick flourish. The fan was a ratty little thing, wearing a faded jean jacket and a gauze blouse tucked into a three-tiered calico skirt. Her long blond hair crinkled down her back and she had puppy-trust blue eyes. Clearly nobody.

But on the other hand, they weren't exactly lined up at her concerts nowadays. Tiredly, Maybelle tried to remember just when was the last time a real somebody had asked for her autograph. It was what came from being the opening act for newer, brighter stars with brassier sounds.

"You don't know how much this means to me," the girl said fervently. "I've loved the Family Rose all my life. There just ain't no other group like them. And you're my favorite of all."

"What's your name, honey?" asked Maybelle, quickly deciding she'd misjudged her.

"June," she said softly. "June Jones."

"Well, June, let's me and you have a little talk about the Family Rose."

"Oh, I wouldn't feel right," said June reverently, "taking up your time and everything."

"No bother. After all,—if it weren't for our fans! Besides, we're short on help here and I could use a hand in wrestling some of these props back into the van."

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June scurried back and forth looking as if she were trying out for a job at McDonald's, smiling and nodding at Maybelle all the while she packed boxes and cartons and instruments. Maybelle watched, shrewdly evaluating June's tireless energy.

The high lonesome sound of pure bluegrass had its own loyal following, and God knew, not so long ago, ten, well maybe fifteen years, she had been on top and she would be again. At one time, she was one of the high-flying fussed-over members of the Family Rose.

She winced as she recalled the reviewer who had just recently referred to her as the "last rose of summer."

Momma and Maybelle and her two sisters had been like a sweet bouquet of country wildflowers, picking and singing their little hearts out.

"And when I die," Momma'd said, "one of you is going to get the family rose. If one of you is worthy by then."

Every time she'd said this, Maybelle and Lulu and Winona would stare wistfully at Momma's guitar—which had an elaborate cloisonné rose inlaid on the polished mahogany case. It was very old and a wonder of workmanship. It had been made by the husband of the slave woman who gave Momma's great-great-grandmother the medicine bundle, and they could only guess at how the man had managed to bring the tiny lengths of rare woods out of Africa.

The daughters' guitars all looked like hers. It required a trained eye to discern that the woods used to shade the petals on Momma's were cocobolo and purpleheart and teak whereas the girls' were merely mahogany and birch with a smattering of maple.

It was a family ritual for Momma to begin each concert by telling folks the history of the guitar—slyly working in their aristocratic Southern background. Then she delicately extended the guitar as if she were inviting them to partake of a sacrament, and Maybelle and Lulu and Winona would walk forward and reverently touch the center of the family rose. Their fans loved the sight of the three lovely daughters paying homage to Momma Rose's abilities.

Momma reminded them often that only one daughter would receive her guitar—the family rose—along with the blessing and the medicine bundle as they had been handed down to her from generations of women.

There were two things Maybelle had wanted more than anything in the world: the family rose—and Momma's medicine bundle.

"You've got a mean streak to you, child," Momma had said once, eyeing Maybelle suspiciously when she urged Momma to choose her

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inheritor before it was too late. "Don't seem right to give the family rose to the one with the tiniest heart. And as to the medicine bundle! That's to be buried with me. None of you care a fig about being a Wise Woman. It would be misused."

Maybelle's mouth twisted with bitterness as she watched June work. Momma had up and died without naming her successor or writing down her wishes, and Maybelle had them both: the family rose and the medicine bundle. But a lot of good it did her! She had acquired the guitar without the blessing and now she simply could not bring herself to play it.

After all, if she did have a mean streak, she had gotten it from Momma. It would be just like the old witch to curse her from beyond the grave.

But the guitar was there at every concert, propped up on a little stand with a spotlight trained on it. And before she sang she would reverently step forward and touch the center of the family rose and say, "This one's for you, Momma," and the crowd would go crazy.

After Momma died, Maybelle's sisters wanted to break up the act.

"You can't *mean* that," Maybelle had protested. "We're a family group. A tradition."

"Without Momma, we ain't nothing, kiddo," Lulu had said flatly. "Without Momma, we can't even carry a tune."

"She died without passing down the gift," said Winona. "We might as well face it."

"That's not true," stammered Maybelle, "and I'm going to prove it."

Well, she had been ten, maybe fifteen years proving it, and now she had nothing to show for it, except a collection of satiny skirts and blouses and callouses on the tips of her fingers and a few ratty old run-down pitiful fans like this poor pathetic little old June Jones. The girl was a worker though. She could say that for her.

"That's it, kid. Thanks a bunch. Now put Momma's guitar back in the case."

"Oh, I couldn't," June said passionately. "I'm not worthy. I'm just a poor homeless orphan girl without kith or kin. I could never, never bring myself to touch Momma Rose's guitar."

"Well, as I live and breathe," drawled Maybelle, "a true believer. Where you staying, kid?"

"Nowhere," she mumbled. "I'm just kind of hanging around the parks. I'm sorta between jobs right now. I'm not a hooker," she blurted suddenly. "Don't want you to think that."

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"It never entered my mind, darlin'. Tell you what, I'm a little down on my luck too, right now. Had a little spat with the boys. They got a little impatient over some money they claimed I owed them. No loyalty from anyone nowadays. I could use a little help setting up and taking things down, so why don't you throw in with me."

June's face lit up like a child's at Christmas.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you. I just want you to know I'll do *anything* for you."

"Except touch Momma's guitar," Maybelle teased lightly.

June lowered her eyes and dug the toe of her old shoe around and around in the dust.

"Ma'am, there's some things I'd rather you didn't tease me about. And the feelings I have for Momma Rose's guitar is one of them. It's kind of like you're making fun of Jesus or something. Growing up in an orphanage was hard. Harder than you'll ever know, and music—especially your family's music—was the only thing that kept me from going crazy."

Maybelle rolled her eyes and examined her nails, but she shut her mouth.

They took off for Nashville, with June driving and Maybelle talking a blue streak as she sipped on a Budweiser.

June worked steadily setting up the stage at a minor open-air concert which Maybelle assured her was not typical of the bookings she ordinarily got, but just one of her little charity obligations she did out of the goodness of her heart.

"You know how to see if everything is hooked up right, kid?"

June nodded. "We had a little group at the orphanage."

"Great. I'll go catch twenty winks. Need my beauty sleep. Then after you sweep everything up, come get me in about an hour—and have some lunch ready."

June nodded and picked up one of the two guitars besides Momma Rose's that they had hooked up to the amps. She strummed the first one, then seeing that all the wires were in working order, she crossed to the second guitar, picked it up, and began to sing.

Maybelle Rose froze in her tracks. Stopped cold dead still. The child had a rare pure voice that sent chills down her spine.

"Stop that caterwauling," she said quickly, needing time to think. "Just strum." She did *not* want anyone else to hear that voice.

"Sorry, ma'am," said June, her voice quivering with shame. "Guess I just got plumb carried away, I miss my old group so much."

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"Never mind, darlin'," said Maybelle, "I forgive you. Shucks, child, with a little coaching from me—your voice is untrained, of course—maybe you could sing backup for me."

June paled with wonder and she looked down at her feet.

"That would be my idea of going to heaven. Truly it would, ma'am."

Maybelle switched off the amplifier and asked June to sing "Wildwood Flower." Her eyes misted. The kid had It. That illusive quality that made critics spin circles. It was the sound that had been missing ever since Momma died. In fact, there was a quality of the voice that brought Momma to mind. If she closed her eyes, Maybelle could see Momma Rose standing there.

"Darlin', do you know the words to all the songs I'm going to be singing tonight?"

June nodded.

"I want you to sing right out. Not overpowering, but confident. Understand?"

"Oh yes, ma'am." The girl's eyes shone.

That night, Maybelle sang and swayed and for the first time in two years, she could see the audience responding in kind. They liked her. Liked her a lot. Pity she was just a simple warm-up act instead of getting top billing. Then after two weeks of studying and stewing, she began fiddling with the sound systems, and in a moment of superb inspiration she tried switching the mikes and amps and sound systems around until it sounded as if June's voice was coming from her mike. And it worked.

By the next stop she had coached June to give the appearance of just swaying modestly and only moving a little, while she was actually belting out the lead using the whole range of her extraordinary voice. Maybelle was actually doing the modest backup, but through hopping, dipping, swaying, and passionately mouthing the words, she appeared to be the one really singing.

"Guess you know," said Maybelle sullenly, after one concert when they had been called back for five encores, "that you don't get to touch the family rose, kid. It's an honor that's reserved for our family."

"I wouldn't think of it," said June. "I told you that right off."

"Just don't want you getting a swelled head. Forgetting who's the actual star around here," said Maybelle.

"About that," said June timidly. "Is what we're doing really right? After all, you're the one all those good folks are paying to see."

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"It's just till I get this little sore throat cleared up, honey," she said, giving her a comforting little pat. "Don't you *know* the show must go on? It's done all the time in the business. What would be wrong would be taking all their money and then not giving them a show at all."

June brightened, "Yes, I *do* understand. It's going to take a long time for me to think like a professional, ain't it, Maybelle?"

Suddenly their bookings began to improve. Instead of always being the opening act, they were asked to be the main show in minor concerts.

By the time they pulled into Nashville in early April, Maybelle's headquarters, the old Bide-A-Wee Motel—sitting rooms and a kitchenette, let by the day, week, or month—looked like the Helmsley Palace.

"This is just temporary, darlin'," purred Maybelle, "until things get better. Gives us a chance to rest our feet and catch our breath."

"It's wonderful," said June. "Truly wonderful."

Maybelle laughed. "After you unload the car and run my bath water, go ahead and take care of the phone calls. Then just scramble me a few eggs and fix a couple of slices of toast for supper. I'm off my feed a little."

After June had wrestled in the equipment, she obediently called Maybelle's answering service. She faithfully recorded each message, taking care to make a little frowny face beside anyone who might be a bill collector, just as Maybelle had taught her.

Of the sixteen phone calls received during the last two weeks, there was only one she could safely bring to Maybelle's attention. June sat respectfully on the edge of the bed, watching the face of the last performing member of the Family Rose as Maybelle returned the call.

Maybelle gasped and tried to control her voice. Dizzily, she replaced the receiver in the cradle and pirouetted across the room.

"This is it, kid, my big break. I've been asked to sing at the Merle Watson Memorial Festival."

"The big one in North Carolina?" squealed June.

"The same! Seems as though old Doc Watson was mighty fond of Momma—and this year he has a hankering to perform with some of the old groups that first gave him a leg up."

"God almighty!"

"It can mean records, bookings, the Grand Ole Opry. Fame, kiddo, fame. And oh, baby, once you've had a taste of it, there ain't nothing

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else that'll take its place ever again. We've got to be perfect. I want you to practice until you drop."

June started backing away from her.

"No, ma'am. I know my place. I have no business up there singing in front of those folks." She set her lips in a thin line. "It just wouldn't be right."

"You little fool," snapped Maybelle as she reached for June's wrist. Then, seeing the shock on the girl's face, her voice became low and coaxing.

"It's all in your head, darling. You've got to get over this. And you will, by God. I'm going to see to it."

Desperately, she cast about in her mind for what it would take to give the girl confidence. She briefly considered all the contents of the medicine bundle. Then, inspired, she knew what it would take—but it cost Maybelle Rose a whole hunk of pride.

"You're going to touch Momma's guitar."

"Please, don't make me," said June.

"Do it, I said. Right on the rose."

June trembled and uneasily extended her hand toward the mahogany case. When her fingers came in contact with the cloisonné rose, she blanched and withdrew them at once.

"There now," said Maybelle. "It didn't kill you. And you're going to join me in our family ritual. And you're to stop crying and carrying on. Just close your eyes and see Momma giving you permission to be up there on that stage."

The next morning, June's face glowed with wonder.

"Miss Maybelle, it's all right if I sing with you. I've got to tell you. Momma Rose came to me in a dream last night. She was standing before me just as real as life and she talked to me. Talked to me real nice."

"Stop that," shrieked Maybelle, aghast at the child's precarious hold on reality. "Stop that. It was something you ate."

But from that time on, June stepped onto the stage with impeccable carriage and walked easily over to the family rose, and confidently extended her finger toward the center of the flower, murmuring her homage to Momma. Then she turned and smiled brilliantly and blew a kiss at the crowd before she modestly took her place five steps behind Maybelle.

Maybelle began to eye her uneasily. The girl was changing before her very eyes.

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The night before the Merle Watson Memorial Concert, they were one of several groups checking their equipment. The patriarch of bluegrass guitar, Doc Watson, blind since childhood, was being led from group to group. He had a legendary sense of sound and had been known to stop a number stone cold dead to holler out instructions to a bewildered technician.

"That bass is too bright, son," he would snap, and listen keenly, with an ear cocked to one side, as minute adjustments were made in the balance of tweeters and woofers. Despite all his efforts to sound gentle, nothing softened his underlying irritability with inept musicians. He simply could not tolerate them. He had an august, dignified, white-headed physical presence, further augmented by the fans' awareness of the pain he had borne throughout his life.

Old now, and mourning the tragic death of his son, Merle Watson, his awesome stature as the World Champion Flat Guitar Picker unsettled many of the musicians who appeared at this star-studded annual memorial concert. Seasoned guitarists dropped their picks and fiddlers' fingers fumbled on the frets. Cloggers stepped on each other's toes and little starlets squeaked on the high notes until the kindly old man settled them down with a tolerant chuckle. Doc Watson had become art, and the epitome of tragedy borne with dignity.

He stopped before June and Maybelle where they were rehearsing on the porch of the cabin. A setting where the lesser solar system of stars performed. He listened keenly, then turned and spoke sharply to his assistant. The man looked blankly at the arrangement of the sound systems. Hastily Maybelle stepped forward.

"As I live and breathe," she gushed, standing directly in front of the grand old man, "I'm Maybelle Rose, sir. And I believe you knew Momma. I'm so proud to meet you. I'm sorry that you've had to listen in before we get things set up right."

"I'd like to meet your backup singer," Doc Watson said quietly.

She studied his face, then spun around and asked June to step forward.

She did, but she could barely blurt out a hello. She dipped her head.

"It's an honor," she murmured.

Doc Watson changed color and he was deathly still.

He knows, Maybelle thought wildly. *He knows.*

He walked off without saying another word to either of them.

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Feverishly Maybelle paced the floor that night. The old man knew! His temper was well known. Sickened, she tried to imagine what he would do or say. Would he expose her right off? Ruin her? Her big chance was becoming a living nightmare.

By morning she had made up her mind. Never in a hundred years would she allow June to take her place. Never.

Calmly, she sent a note to Doc Watson's assistant. "Please inform Doc Watson that my first two songs will introduce my backup singer, June Jones, a young lady of exceptional voice."

She pulled on her rubber gloves and trembled as she loosened the leather tie on her medicine bundle. The substance she wanted was in a golden locket molded around a tiny vial. Gingerly she unscrewed the stopper and dipped a pin inside. Then she carefully dropped a pinpoint of liquid onto the center of the rose on Momma's guitar.

There were poisons which would have acted faster. But a long, loving, extravagant introduction would set well with Doc Watson. Maybelle savored the idea of folks talking about how generous and unselfish she'd been. Besides, the first song would not show off the spectacular range of June's voice.

"Ready, kid?" asked Maybelle, just before they were ready to go on.

June nodded, her eyes filled with tears.

"I have a surprise for you, Maybelle."

"Well, I have a surprise for you too, kid," said Maybelle coldly.

"But I want to *tell* you something," begged June.

Maybelle brushed past her and walked out of the cabin.

"Come *on,*" she hissed back at June. "My fans are waiting."

"Thank you. Thank you." Maybelle smiled brightly at the applause. "And now, as many of our fans know, before we begin a concert, I always thank Momma Rose. We owe it all to her."

The applause was deafening. She respectfully dipped her head and walked over to Momma's guitar.

"Be with us, Momma," she said slowly. She reached for the rose, but her fingers stopped short by a quarter of an inch.

Then June stepped forward and imitated Maybelle. Her fingers connected, resonating on the soundboard with a soft muffled thump. Then, standing side by side, they gave a slight bow and went to the front and picked up their guitars.

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"My little backup singer knows I have a surprise for her, but she doesn't know what," said Maybelle coyly. "As you all know, it has long been the tradition of the Family Rose to support new talent."

She swallowed hard, nearly choking on the words. "And today, making her debut solo performance is my own little ol' backup, June Jones."

June gasped and stepped forward.

"I can't," she stammered. "I can't possibly."

"I insist," hissed Maybelle. "Give it all you've got."

June stepped forward as if she were waking from a dream. At first she kept her head bowed, then when the warmth of the audience reached her, the rhythm began pulsing through her body. She finished the first song to deafening applause and then started on her second number. The one that would demonstrate her incredible range.

Horrified, Maybelle watched. Her throat constricted in protest. She shouldn't be able to carry on. Now everyone would know it had been June's voice all along. Everyone would know.

June's eyes glittered with excitement and she became lost in the high sweet tones, her fingers flying across the guitar.

Maybelle's heart beat faster and faster. The audience rose to its feet and was swaying—clearly loving, adoring June Jones. Maybelle's blood rushed to her head. It wasn't working. She gave a little squeal before she fell writhing to the floor of the stage.

June got to her first.

"No, no, no," she cried frantically. "Please!" She turned to Doc Watson's assistant, who had rushed onto the stage. "Get an ambulance."

"Maybelle, you're the only family I've got. You're going to be a star." June cradled Maybelle in her arms. Tears streamed down her face.

"Maybelle. Listen to me. I tried to tell you. It's your time. Momma came to me in a dream last night and said so. She told me it was time that you had her guitar. You were playing her guitar, sweet darlin' Maybelle. Momma said it was time to hand you the family rose."

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a *NEW* short story by

BRENDAN DuBOIS

A finalist for the Robert L. Fish Award and a nominee for an Edgar Allan Poe Award for his short fiction, Brendan DuBois will this year see the publication of his first novel, a mystery that introduces series sleuth Lewis Cole (Pocket Books). While pursuing his literary interests, Mr. DuBois continues to work full-time in public relations in Exeter, New Hampshire. . . .

MY UNCLE'S WAR

by BRENDAN DuBOIS

I still remember it so clearly—even though it's been five years—that ten minutes after I asked the former Tracy Cullen to marry me, she asked, "Does this mean that your uncle will have to be invited to the wedding?"

Even though I have three uncles, I knew the one she was talking about: my mother's brother, my Uncle Rupert. My father's two brothers—Michael and Brian—were a banker and a housing contractor, and lived comfortable and normal lives in Massachusetts. Uncle Rupert lived by himself in Montcalm, New Hampshire. I wasn't too sure how he could be pegged by what he did for a living. I don't know if the U.S. Census form has a classification for someone who wanders around town with a shopping cart wearing baggy clothes, retrieving bottles and cans.

I remembered that day as I drove to visit Uncle Rupert, who had shared his hometown of Montcalm with Tracy and me since we bought the weekly *Montcalm Gazette*. I hate the name Gazette and probably always will, but in one of those fights that pretends to be a business discussion, Tracy had said, "Dave, we're probably the sixth or seventh owners of this lovely little newspaper. The name

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Gazette is a tradition. You know what tradition means in a town like Montcalm. Drop the name and we'll lose a bunch of advertisers and subscribers. If you want to own a newspaper that's going to be dead in a year but that has a name like Chronicle or Newsletter, well, we can do that if you'd like."

I'm the editor and Tracy runs the business side. On that one, I let her have her way. But on our proposal night five years ago, I smiled sweetly and said, "Don't worry. I'll make sure he showers and gets a new suit, and I'll see that he doesn't steal any food from the reception." That almost started our first fight as betrotheds, but that's another story.

Uncle Rupert's house is on a dirt lane called Foxtrot Road. I pulled into the long and rutted driveway that led up to the house. The home seems ageless; its weathered wood hasn't been kissed by paint in years. The front porch and the yard are cluttered with everything from old bicycles to a washing machine, and a ten-year-old Volkswagen rests on concrete blocks before the equally gray and weathered garage. The house squats on a knoll. Scattered about a lawn of wild grass are a few rosebushes and saplings.

When I got out of my car—a two-year-old light blue Ford Tempo that Tracy and I plan to baby and keep for six or seven years—Uncle Rupert came out of the house and walked through the knee-high grass. I carried a shopping bag which was filled with some canned food, white tube socks, and two weeks' worth of newspapers and magazines. While I was wearing clothes that Tracy had bought for me—tan chinos and a lime green polo shirt and TopSiders (though sailing makes me seasick)—Uncle Rupert looked as if he had dressed that morning from a Salvation Army dumpster. He had on Keds black and white basketball sneakers, a tattered pair of jeans—held up by a rope belt—and a U.S. Army fatigue shirt that had been made into a short-sleeved shirt through a few hacks of a knife or scissors.

He peered at me through his thick glasses and said, "You're Marla and Greg's boy, aren't you?"

I tried not to smile. "That's true, Uncle Rupert. Dave Conroy."

"Hunh." He stood before me, arms crossed. "What was your mother's maiden name, then, eh?"

"Gagnon. Just like yours, Uncle Rupert."

He nodded and blinked and then slapped me on the shoulder and said, "Of course. Of course. Just wanted to make sure, that's all. Let's go inside and get us a drink."

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Tall and thin, with a gray and black moustache and hair always cut about one inch shy of a crewcut, Uncle Rupert seemed to be all arms and legs. The fatigue shirt was open and I made out a furrowed scar along his chest. There was another scar about the base of his skull, and every now and then he'd rap his head with a fist and say, "Silver plate in there, Dave. Make sure they give you my skull when I die. Ought to make a nice nest egg."

Inside the house it was dark and warm. The furniture was old and there were piles of books and magazines everywhere. My wife refuses to come to this house. She says she takes one look at the clutter and debris and gets nauseous. It does take some getting used to, I'll admit, but I was surprised one day, looking closely at the collection of junk and bags of bric-a-brac. The place was clean. Not much dust and you could get around. There was no collection of forty-three cats or pile of soiled underwear in the corner. It was cluttered, but in an odd way, it was neat.

When we had put away my bag of donations, we went out to the porch and sat down in a couple of wicker chairs whose white paint had faded to gray. The wild grass lawn fell away to a line of trees and above the trees one could make out Lake Montcalm and the peaks of the White Mountain range. The view is terrific, but I think the sights of the mountains are wasted on Uncle Rupert—I don't think he's ever climbed anything higher than a molehill in his life, and many's the time he's asked me to step on a stool and get something for him from a top shelf in the kitchen. Imagining him on a mountaintop was about as ridiculous as imagining a lion raiding a corn patch.

We sipped from beers that I had brought last week and talked of a few things: the weather, the Red Sox, and the state of the union. As I drank, I looked again at the rosebushes and thought, such work, to put them so far out. And I asked, as I always did, "Uncle Rupert, why did you plant those rosebushes so far out? And why don't you clear some of those clumps of brush?"

Usually at this question Uncle Rupert would giggle and say, "My secret, nephew. My secret, and let's see if you can figure it out." But this early evening on a July day, he surprised me, and with the surprise came that nibbling feeling at the base of my skull that said something was very wrong.

Uncle Rupert breathed some and said, "They're there for a purpose, young one. A very good purpose. Ever notice how this house sits up on a hill? Nice and easy for defending."

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He gestured to the rosebushes and the brush with his bottle of beer. "I've got a nice field of fire here, Dave. And those rosebushes and saplings mark off the distances from the house. First clump of rosebushes is fifty meters, that bunch of saplings is a hundred meters, and so on. Anytime they try to come up here and get me, I'll be waitin' and my weapons will be zeroed in. I always got a weapon with me. And they'll be surprised."

I thought I was going to drop my beer in astonishment, and I said, somewhat stupidly, "Are they coming soon?"

He nodded. "Not tonight. But soon enough. You'll see."

Later that night I joined Tracy out on the dock near our home. It was dark out on Lake Montcalm, with only a few red and green running lights visible at the north end of the lake where speedboats chugged along doing God knows what. There weren't many bugs around us since we were both wearing the perfume of the north woods—insect spray. We sat in folding chairs on the dock, our hands occasionally brushing each other's, as we sipped from glasses of wine. Dinner had been takeout Italian. I couldn't remember the last time either of us had cooked anything in our kitchen.

I sipped at my wine. I also couldn't remember the last time Tracy had stopped after having just one glass. She was on her third. She tossed her long brown hair and said, "How's crazy old Uncle Rupert?"

The glass was cold in my hand. From out on the lake there came the sound of a loon calling to its mate. It's been said up here that the sound of a loon in distress is like the keening of a widow woman mourning her man, but even that doesn't do justice to the way the sound reaches in and tugs at your heart. The species is more than a million years old, and that night its call sounded as old as time.

I said, "Uncle Rupert's doing fine. At least, forgetting the fact that he's convinced the mysterious 'they' are coming to get him."

Tracy giggled and for a moment I almost joined her. It did sound slightly ridiculous, like something out of a bad movie made in the paranoid 1950s. From the lights of our house I made out her face, the flawless skin and the wide smile, and the slightly bushy eyebrows that, depending on the time of day, either made her look silly or like an unemployed model.

"Did he say who 'they' were?" she asked.

"No. Only that he'd tell me in due time."

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She tapped the edge of the wineglass against her teeth. "You know, there's something scary there, David. Suppose your Uncle Rupert decides the mysterious 'they' are a troop of boy scouts marching across his lawn? What will he do then?"

I finished off my wine. "I made him promise that he wouldn't do anything rash. He's to call me anytime he thinks he's being threatened."

"David," she said, in a tone that didn't belong to my wife but to the business manager of a newspaper, someone who didn't believe in anything that wasn't signed or notarized. "David, do you actually believe a man who collects cans for a living can remember something like that?"

I shot back, "Forgetting our wedding day so soon?" and felt a twinge, knowing that the tone was too harsh, that Tracy would sit there, jaw set, waiting for me to apologize. But for a moment I thought of our wedding, and how Uncle Rupert had stood in the rear of the church, wearing a clean and pressed U.S. Army uniform, that of a colonel, decked out in ribbons and medals, most of which I didn't recognize. And how he had danced with the women at the reception and shook my hand, pressing a folded fifty-dollar bill into it, and yes, a week later I saw him back on the streets of Montcalm, pushing his grocery cart, looking for cans.

Tracy said nothing, and I was trying to think of which apology would work when the sound of the loons came again, their long, yelping cry, and though I knew it was only the birds, I looked behind us to make sure no one was there.

After a while, Tracy left. I stayed. Looking out on the waters.

The next day was Tuesday, deadline day for the weekly *Montcalm Gazette*. Our office is in a tiny brick building near the lake, in a restored area that's host to vacationers every year, either skiers on their way to the mountains in the winter or families who rent cottages on Lake Montcalm for the summer. We share the brick building with an insurance company and copier store, space enough for a staff consisting of Tracy, myself, and a receptionist. I have a couple of freelancers who do stories for the towns outside of Montcalm but I do everything else, including layout, myself.

I spent the morning laying out stories for that Wednesday's edition. As the deadline approached for the print shop's courier to pick up the laid-out pages, there was a phone call from an advertiser for Tracy, and then a minute or so later, one from Tracy herself, inviting

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me out to lunch. A peace offering, I supposed, from the night before. I accepted and had the pages ready for the courier with ninety seconds to spare. A typical day.

I made the short drive to the Lakeview Restaurant and, as I usually did when I drove during the day, I passed Uncle Rupert pushing his shopping cart down Water Street, the main avenue in Montcalm. He had on a pair of tan chinos and the same army fatigue shirt as before. I honked my horn and he waved back. I'm not sure he recognized me, since he was pulling the cart up next to an overflowing trash can and he always got his share of greetings from the residents, being as much a part of the landscape as the lake and the mountains.

Once though—and my heart aches at the memory of it—I saw some out-of-state tourists laughing and giggling, taking pictures of Uncle Rupert as he was up to his elbows in a trash can. I can't remember a time I had been so angry, and luckily for them (and probably me) they had left by the time I had parked my car and gotten there with a tire iron in hand.

Tracy and I had lunch on the outside deck and she paid, which meant that it was a fairly serious peace offering. The deck was about half full, mostly with people you could see were tourists, since most residents of Montcalm don't eat lunch wearing shorts and T-shirts and carrying camera bags. Out on the lake a few boats were dragging around water skiers and there was the awful whine of a Jet Ski. I decided then it was time to write another editorial demanding that the state outlaw Jet Skis on Lake Montcalm.

Suddenly my wife put down her glass of wine—I had iced tea—and asked, "What can you tell me about your uncle?"

I thought she was joking, but the look on her face told me otherwise. I shrugged. "Not much to tell. He's always been pretty secretive about his background, and whenever I asked my mom, she would just nod and say, 'Your Uncle Rupert's different, that's all.' And then Mom would change the subject."

"No other relatives around?" she asked.

I rattled the ice cubes in my glass. "Nope. He and Mom were brother and sister, and that was it. Maybe some distant cousins in Massachusetts, but I doubt it. And since my parents decided to have only me, that's about it."

"So you're his closest relative."

"That's right."

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She seemed to think about that for a moment, and said, "Then don't you think you have a duty?"

"A duty?"

She nodded. "A duty, Dave. You're his only surviving relative. Don't you have a duty to learn what you can about him, to try to help him? Maybe he has other relatives you don't know about. Maybe he's had an interesting life, something you could write about."

The look on her face made me uncomfortable, as if I was being accused of shirking some task, and in a way, maybe I was. "He's pretty secretive, Tracy. I once asked him why he collected cans and bottles, and he said, 'Because I enjoy fresh air and the feel of glass and metal in my hands.' That type of stuff isn't too helpful."

"Then there are other sources, Dave. Look. I'm not trying to pressure you. It was just an idea. You're the only one he has now, the only one from his family that he can talk to and feel like he belongs. Maybe you owe him that."

I brought my glass up to my face, sipping at the melted ice water. "Where would I start?"

She stuck her tongue out at me. "You're a goddamn newspaper editor. You'll figure it out."

Peace offer accepted, along with her challenge. There was a sparkle in her eye, a coyness and a bit of intrigue that reminded me again of why I had married her.

Amanda Craig is the police chief for the town of Montcalm, and she and I have a pretty reasonable relationship. Unlike many newspaper editor/police chief pairings, we've worked out an understanding of each other's needs. I won't bug her for every bit and kernel of information, and she won't try to hide things from me if there's a story I'm interested in, and we both have an understanding of what off the record means.

I had called her the day after my lunch with my wife with a few crumbs of information that I'd been able to gather together: Uncle Rupert's birthdate and birthplace, the approximate year in which he entered the army (1954), and, luckiest of all, his Social Security number.

Today I was meeting her at her office, which is about a mile away from Lake Montcalm in a plain wooden building between the Montcalm General Store and an apartment house. Amanda's about a year or two older than me and a couple of inches over six feet tall. Except for a couple of part-time cops who help out in the summer,

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she's the entire department. I parked the Tempo on the main street and walked in. She was behind a low wooden counter at one of two gunmetal gray desks separated by filing cabinets.

She smiled at me as I came in and stood up. Her uniform was dark blue, tight against her thighs, and she wore black combat boots. Whenever I'm with her there's a dark twinkle in her brown eyes that makes me fearful for my marriage. Though she's known to pick up a male tourist every summer—preferably stronger and dumber than she is—there's a little teasing that she's always happy to give me.

I've heard a few rumbles of discontent from some of the old-timers in the town about her love life, but the crime rate in Montcalm is lower than in the surrounding towns, and I've seen her take on three drunk bikers at two in the morning with that twinkle in her eye and they were on the ground on their stomachs in cuffs within seconds. That kind of performance usually shuts up the grumblers.

She shook my hand and winked and said, "I've got that information for you, David. But it's not much." She went back to her desk and picked up a computer printout that was only a few inches long. This summer Amanda was wearing her brown hair short along the sides with a long flattop and a little braid that came out at the nape of her neck. I'm fairly sure that the selectmen don't like her hairstyle, but since hers is the only town department that regularly comes in under budget, they keep their mouths shut.

She came back and gave me the piece of paper and I folded it over without looking at it and said, "I hope this trace didn't take up too much of your time."

She shrugged, still smiling. "Not at all. Tell you what, you take me out to lunch next week and we'll call it even."

"Deal," I said.

Her smile widened and she said, "But only if you leave your business partner behind. She makes me nervous."

Jeez. "We'll see," I said and she laughed and punched me on the shoulder. I got out of there before I got myself handcuffed.

Back at my car, I opened up the printout and felt a pang of disappointment almost as keen as on that day almost twenty years ago when I learned that sometimes parents lie.

At the office I made a couple of phone calls to Uncle Rupert's home. There was no answer. From another part of the office came the hesitant *tap-tap* of the typewriter keys as one of our freelancers

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wrote a story about a house fire in Purmort. I tried Uncle Rupert twice more, and I got two calls of my own: a cub scout leader who wanted a photographer (namely me) to take pictures of their honor awards ceremony, and that advertiser again for Tracy. I took scribbled messages for both and decided then and there to leave.

And as I left the office, a man across the street, near the bandstand, took my picture. He was in his mid-forties, heavyset, and wearing bright shorts and a T-shirt. Of course, he might have been taking a picture of the brick building where the *Gazette*'s offices are, for historical reasons. But there was a funny look to his face as he put his camera down, as if he was satisfied.

When I got to my car and looked again, he was gone.

I found Uncle Rupert in his library, reading. It was a small room set off from the living room, jammed with leather-bound volumes and hardcover books, from biographies to encyclopedias to history books to science fiction. Yet all of the books were covered with dust, as if they hadn't been touched since they had been placed there. Uncle Rupert was in a sagging easy chair, one corner held up by a couple of bricks, and was reading one of the week-old issues of the *New York Times* that I had brought over. He had on ragged cutoff jeans and a green T-shirt and muddy sneakers that were kept together by gray duct tape.

I sat on a stool and said, "Do you want to go outside?"

"Sure," he said, his head bobbing. He got up and took me out to the rear porch, where there were bins filled with old bottles and cans, along with two washing machines and a wagon with no wheels. Flies buzzed around and Uncle Rupert said, "You taking the rest of the day off?"

For a moment I looked around, as if to make sure my business partner (and wife!) wasn't there to see me. "I guess so, Uncle Rupert. I just felt like I had to come here."

"Ah," he said. The rear of the house looked off to the mountains, and close at hand, the land sloped down to a treeline a couple of hundred yards away. About halfway to the treeline was an old oak tree, gnarled and ancient, which towered over the house. I nodded in the tree's direction and said, "You leave that tree there as a marker?"

He smiled and rubbed at his arms. "Actually, nephew, that tree's about sixty-two meters away, so it doesn't serve that much purpose

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as a marker. I kept it there 'cause it was older than me and I guessed it deserved to live."

"Anything else happen since I was here last?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"But you are armed, right?" I asked, not feeling proud of myself at all. "Just like the army days?"

A couple of crows circled over the oak tree, and I wondered if they could see us. Uncle Rupert nodded. "Just like my army days, nephew."

I felt like sighing or just walking away. But I remembered the few stories my mother had told me and how proud he had looked dressed as a colonel in the infantry on my wedding day, and I turned to him and said, "Uncle Rupert, you were a cook. And you were a corporal when you were discharged."

The crows circled the oak tree a couple of more times.

Later it was almost dusk and we were on the front porch looking out to the lake and the mountains. Uncle Rupert was sipping a light whiskey and water from an old peanut butter jar, and my hands were empty. We sat on a couch that was missing its cushions, and Uncle Rupert had his feet stretched out to the cracked porch railing. There were a couple of faded white scars on his legs.

He looked over at me and said, "You got a point, coming up here and telling me that?"

My hands felt moist, and I didn't know where to put them. "I'm not sure. I guess I realized that I've never known that much about you, and that time is getting on. I wanted to settle some questions I had about you, Uncle Rupert."

He nodded, both worn hands clasping the peanut butter jar. "You could have asked me, nephew."

I almost laughed at him. "That's a good one, Uncle Rupert. You've never been the most open one of the family."

Uncle Rupert lifted up his drink and looked at it and said, "Old habits stay with you, you know. Like bad memories. They both never really go away, no matter how hard you try."

We sat there for a while, not saying anything, just watching the sun set in the distant mountains. I knew Tracy was home and probably wondering where I was, and I was getting hungry. With the approach of dusk Uncle Rupert and his home looked a bit older, a bit grayer, and I decided it was time to move on. I stood up and said,

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"I'm sorry to have bothered you, Uncle Rupert. I won't say any more."

As I began to leave he said, "You ever hear the expression 'black jobs'?"

The sun was sinking deeper and the air was still. It seemed as though his voice was different. I thought for a moment, remembering a *New York Times Magazine* piece I had read some months ago.

"Jobs associated with black budgets," I said. "Spending in the government that's never submitted to Congress, that never has any oversight. Usually associated with intelligence matters."

He nodded, as if he was proud of me, or pleased that some assumption he had about me had just come true. He said, "Very good, David. Very good."

I said, "You want to keep going Uncle Rupert, or should I leave?"

But Uncle Rupert wasn't looking at me anymore. He was just staring out across his weed-infested, overgrown lawn, softly saying, "A lot of stuff I did was black, very black. Check it out, my friend. Check out what happened in a place called Alma-Ata, in nineteen sixty. And then you can come back and we'll talk some more."

"And you think I'll find something, just like that?"

He smiled. "You found out about the baker's school. Anything else there?"

I shook my head. "Just that you were discharged and you've lived here ever since."

"Good," he said, satisfied again. "The story about me being just a baker's lasted. You'll learn more."

I turned to leave again and I said, "I suppose you're telling me that you did more than just cook when you were in the service."

Uncle Rupert smiled and moved and in a heartbeat a Model 1911 U.S. Army Colt .45 was in his hand, and he had it pointing at me, lifting up the barrel. Something slowed in my chest and Uncle Rupert said, "Don't ever doubt me, nephew."

The library in Montcalm is open on Wednesdays and Fridays, but I think I've read almost every book in there twice, so I drove into Franklin the next morning instead of going to work at the *Gazette,* and at their city library, I spent an hour or two rummaging through the stacks. Finding Alma-Ata took only a few minutes and a very large atlas. I located it in Central Asia in what used to be the Soviet Union. Finding the rest of the puzzle took a bit longer, as I had to go through a yearbook or two of facts about the early 1960s.

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When I did find the answer, I sat still for a long while, listening to the ticking of a large grandfather clock in the corner. The answer was there, right before me on the polished wood of the library's table, but all I saw was Uncle Rupert, a shy grin on his face, as he rummaged through a trash can, looking for cans and bottles.

The drive back took a half-hour, and for those thirty minutes, a light blue van followed me all the way.

Back at the *Gazette* I shuffled papers for a while, not doing a single second of work, and then I left and got into my car and after a half-hour or so of driving found Uncle Rupert near Founder's Park, which is at the lake. On this afternoon he was wearing the same clothes as yesterday, right down to the tattered sneakers bound together by sticky gray duct tape. He had a green trash bag in his rusting grocery cart and one of the front wheels of the cart wasn't touching the concrete, it was just wiggling about in circles, like a fish trapped on a hook. He nodded at me as I came over and started rummaging through a wire-mesh trash can that had a soiled sign on its side: KEEP YOUR LAKE CLEAN.

"Suppose you want to talk again," he said, looking at a can in his hand before dropping it in the trash bag.

"That's right," I said, feeling slightly out of breath.

He made a motion with his head. "Come over here. We'll take a seat by the lake."

We sat on a metal park bench and at another bench about a yard away, two young girls in white shorts and black bikini tops giggled and whispered and then walked away, looking back at the two of us. Uncle Rupert had dragged his grocery cart over with us and was now leaning his arms on its side, looking out over the lake.

"That was quick, nephew," he said. "I'm impressed, and I'm glad."

"Why are *you* glad?"

He seemed to try to shrug it off, but it didn't work. "Time is sometimes precious, and it's felt that way for me for a while. Go on, David. Tell me what you know."

Out on the lake, more Jet Skis, and I felt guilty for a moment about not writing that editorial for the *Gazette*. I said, "At Alma-Ata in May of nineteen sixty, an American U-2—a spy plane—was shot down as it was crossing over the Soviet Union. The pilot was captured and after being convicted of spying, spent a few years in a Soviet prison before he was traded for a Soviet spy that we had."

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I looked over at my uncle—good old Uncle Rupert, silly old Uncle Rupert, crazy old Uncle Rupert—and I said, "You were there, weren't you? As part of a rescue mission, to try to get the pilot out."

He leaned forward on his shopping cart and hunched up his thin shoulders. A tourist couple walked by and the woman whispered something to the man. Both of them laughed. Uncle Rupert said, "Dear me, just when I was thinking highly of you, nephew, you make a bonehead assumption like that."

My ears felt sunburned with embarrassment as Uncle Rupert said, "Oh, I was there all right, with other members of my team. And we did what we were told to do that May day. Aboard that U-2 was a tracking device, and we had the equipment that tracked it. We followed it right along as it came over, at about a hundred-and-twenty-thousand feet. We also had an experimental, high-altitude surface-to-air missile, and when that U-2 came in range, we blew it out of the sky, David. Us. Not the Soviets."

For a moment I thought, He's making this all up. This is Uncle Rupert, the man who collects cans and bottles for a living, and who owns maybe two pairs of pants.

I said, "Why, Uncle Rupert?" It seemed to be the only question that made sense at the moment.

He rubbed his hands together, light gray with dirt. "The government and military like to give the impression of being monolithic, one big happy family, but the forces are made up of little empires and fiefdoms, David. Alliances are made and broken over things like promotions, weapon systems, and policy. I think that one group thought our U-2 overflights were dangerous, that they would incite the Soviets to respond, and that the only way to stop the overflights would be a shootdown. At that time, the Soviets didn't have any aircraft or missiles that could reach the U-2. But we did."

Another Jet Ski thundered by. "Later, as I grew older and smarter, I made another guess. About that time Eisenhower and Khrushchev were going to meet in Paris for a summit. If you're in the military establishment and your friends don't like the idea of summits or arms-control agreements, how better to wreck a summit than with a U-2 shootdown? Which was exactly what we did, and was exactly what happened."

"My God," I said. "How could you have done that, shoot down your own aircraft?"

He looked over at me, his eyes watery and moist behind his eyeglasses. "We were just following orders. But you know, that's not

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good enough. Other army men in other wars have tried that same defense, nephew, and no one ever quite believed them. Some of them were actually hanged."

A little later I bought him lunch at the Montcalm House, and we got a window seat so Uncle Rupert could keep an eye on his shopping cart. After we finished eating, he looked around to see if anyone was watching, then spread out a paper napkin and filled it with pads of butter, sugar packages, and the three uneaten rolls from our lunch. He tied up the corners of the napkin and put it in his lap, pulling the tablecloth closer to him so no one could see.

I put my credit card on the bill, wincing at the knowledge that Tracy would see the receipt next month and ask why I had taken my uncle out to eat at one of the most expensive restaurants in the county, and glanced outside at the fair blue waters of the lake. During lunch Uncle Rupert hadn't talked about much, or given me the answers I wanted to get. There was a man out there, walking by, and he carried a camera. I looked away.

After the waitress picked up my credit card and the check, I said, "Were you in the army then, Uncle Rupert?"

He kept both of his hands under the table. "Yep. Everything you got about me being a cook was a cover. I was in a special unit that was loaned out whenever it was needed. We did black work, stuff that nobody was ever supposed to find out about. Stuff that could make you throw up, nephew. Eventually I made colonel, but by then the black things rested heavily on my mind, and I couldn't sleep. It seemed like I stayed awake for weeks. I got an honorable discharge and then ended up here."

I looked out at his half-full shopping cart and said, "This all part of your cover, Uncle Rupert? Being the town eccentric?"

He scratched at his moustache. "Maybe. Or maybe it's just my form of penance, nephew. To pay back for all the horrible things I was involved with. I remember a lot, David, and it scares me. Even now, I'm still afraid." His eyes suddenly became watery.

"Why are you afraid now? It's been years."

He nodded, blinking back tears. "There's still a network, and a word can still get passed here and there. Look at the news, nephew. We're in the middle of a new world order. We're becoming best buddies with our former enemies, and all the walls are coming down. And with all those fancy treaties being signed, and the missiles being dismantled, there's other stuff going on. Embarrassing stories

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and incidents from the past are being buried—destroyed. The old wars are over, but others keep on going."

The waitress came back with the credit card and slip and I ignored her. "But Uncle Rupert—"

"Don't you see?" he said, interrupting me. "A few years back, things started to improve and Rudolf Hess died while in prison in Berlin. Hitler's number two man. Can you imagine the secrets he had? Just before things changed, before the Wall came down, he conveniently committed suicide. And the Allied forces destroyed the prison and any evidence that was still there within a day or so of his death. You think that was just coincidence, nephew?"

By then his voice had grown louder and other people in the restaurant were looking at us.

"Uncle Rupert, please . . ."

He nodded and whispered, "Sorry. I get worked up." He leaned forward in his seat and lowered his voice again. "They're out there. Watching and listening. For all I know, my phone's tapped. They have night-vision glasses that can see you and count your nostril hairs at midnight from a hundred yards away. But I've fixed them. I have all of the records of where I've been and what I've done, and I've hidden them. So when they come for me, I'll tell 'em, don't waste your time, 'cause I can still bite you when I'm gone."

I signed the credit-card slip, eager to get out of there. I could see the manager in his $500 suit hovering by the hostess's station, staring at our table. "You're not going anywhere, Uncle Rupert," I said, trying to put a light tone in my voice.

"Oh yes I am, David," he said, stumbling a bit as he got to his feet, carrying his loaded napkin with both hands. "But I'm the one who wants to decide where to go and when."

I moved around the table, blocking the owner's view of what Uncle Rupert was carrying. "Are they still out there, Uncle Rupert?"

"Oh yes," he said, and his next words chilled me. "And they're watching you, too."

That night I was in the living room of our house, reading a book about the U-2 incident, when the door slammed open and then shut and Tracy started walking in from the kitchen. I felt myself tense up and closed the book on a finger to save my place. Tracy is one for sending a lot of signals my way and the double door slams equaled a fire alarm.

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She dropped her black leather purse on the floor and put both hands on her hips. She wore a tan skirt that was cut conservatively, a white blouse and a matching jacket. The forehead above her thick eyebrows was furrowed.

"I've always told you, David, that whenever you decide you're sick of running this newspaper, you can just let me know and we'll get on with things," she said, her face red.

I sat up straighter in the chair. With that sentence, her signals had escalated from a fire alarm to an air-raid siren.

"I remember," I said. "And nothing's changed, Tracy. I still like editing the *Gazette*. It beats writing feature pieces on woodworking for the *Globe*."

That was supposed to elicit a smile, and it didn't. It was bomb shelter time.

"The name Armco Associates mean anything to you?" she demanded.

I knew I had about five seconds to answer, so I fudged it. "Sounds vaguely familiar."

She rolled her eyes. "Vaguely familiar," she said, in a mocking tone. "Let me make it a bit more familiar, David. Armco Associates is an advertising agency, working out of Boston. They have the advertising account for the Pine Run Mall, which is set to open in a month. They wanted to do a summer run of advertising with us—four full-page ads an issue for the rest of the summer!"

Lord. I couldn't remember the last time we had run a single full-page ad. I was about to say something and then a sick feeling started in the well of my stomach.

"And 'wanted' is the operative word, David," she continued, hands still on hips. "They've called the office three times this week, and three times they've left messages for me. I found them on your desk. Not my desk. Your desk. And when I finally got back to them, they had rightly decided that we weren't interested, so they're running their summer's worth of ads with the *Tri-Town Banner*."

The *Banner*. Our nearest competitor and a free shopper that had about as much news sense as a grammar-school newspaper. Dear me.

"Tracy, I—"

"Forgot? Right? Just inconveniently forgot. Listen, my friend, there's more to running a newspaper than just writing stories. There's a business side and—"

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It was my turn to interrupt. "Spare me the lesson, Tracy, okay? Look, maybe they're overreacting. We'll give them a call, offer them a discount—"

She shook her head. "Maybe so, but there's more than just this foul-up, David. Tell me, with deadline only a couple of days away, how many stories have you written and edited for the next issue?"

The correct answer should have been four and I was going to lie and say two, but if she had looked at my desk for the messages, she probably already knew what was going on.

"There's a selectmen's meeting tomorrow, and if I can get out early enough, I'll have three, maybe four stories done by the weekend."

Tracy folded her arms and said, "What is it, David?"

I tried to think of another story to tell her but gave up. I told her some about Uncle Rupert. Not the whole truth—he had made me promise to keep what he'd told me a secret, and I could not break that vow—but I told her enough. That Uncle Rupert was being haunted by something bad he had done in the past, and that he felt he was being watched. It took me about a half-hour. Tracy leaned up against the doorway while I was talking. When I was finished, she ran her hands through her hair and said, "So. Uncle Rupert, instead of being the volunteer town trash-collector, is actually a scarred veteran—a cook!—with a terrible past. Right?"

I shifted in my seat, took a deep breath, and said, "That's not what I said."

"Oh," she said, with exaggerated politeness. "I'm sorry. Uncle Rupert. The one who tried to convince you last summer to spend a couple of nights up on Tower Hill. The one who wanted you to take pictures of the flying saucers that were hovering over the lake at night and speaking to him through the silver plate in his skull. Last summer he was a UFO investigator. This year he's a haunted vet. What's on tap next year for your crazy Uncle Rupert, David? Counsel to the president?"

I reopened the book in my lap and said, "Your Aunt Louise is two hundred pounds overweight and believes in astrology. I think Uncle Rupert is a hell of a lot saner than your fat and crazy Aunt Louise."

Oops. Tracy is sensitive about many things, and her relatives are high up on the list. I saw her eyebrows narrow until it looked like she had only one, and she said in a flat tone, "My Aunt Louise lent us five thousand dollars when we bought our little venture, Mr. Conroy. It might behoove you to remember that, especially since we

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haven't paid her back a dime and you have the habit of blithely tossing away summer advertisers."

Well, with that I went back to reading and Tracy went upstairs, back to slamming doors and bureau drawers, and I heard the click of the bedroom light being shut off. It was getting late, and my shirt felt three sizes too small around my chest as I read about how Eisenhower and Khrushchev danced the nuclear ball in 1960.

I knew what was expected of me. I would slowly trudge upstairs and crawl into bed and lie next to her in silence for a few minutes. Then the low conversation would start and Tracy would be logical and reasonable as she pointed out the errors of my ways, and I would grunt a lot, stroking her hair, and then she'd kiss me and everything would be okay.

I got up from the chair, turned off all of the lights, and went into the downstairs closet where I picked up a few things and passed through the kitchen. I locked the door behind me and headed down to the dock with my foam mattress and a couple of blankets. It was a clear night. I lay there trying to see if there were any shooting stars, and of course, the skies were still. I had trouble sleeping. My chest was still tight and then too, underneath the mattress was a large knife, which I had taken from the kitchen.

I think that kept me up as well. I wondered who was out there, who might be watching.

It so happened that in the afternoon of the next day, before I was going to have a solitary supper and then spend three hours at the Montcalm selectmen's meeting, Uncle Rupert called me.

"David?" he asked. From the sound of a truck in the background, I knew that he was in a phone booth.

"Uncle Rupert? Are you all right?"

"Aahh," he sighed. "My head's been hurtin' again. That damn silver plate. Tell me again, what was your mother's maiden name, eh?"

"Gagnon. Just like yours, Uncle Rupert."

"Good." Another truck roared by. "Just making sure. Look, things are all right, nephew. But do one thing for me, all right? Don't go blabbin' around about what we talked about yesterday. They got big ears, you know, big ears, and it wouldn't take much for them to find me. I get the feeling they're out there, that they're getting close."

I remembered what I said to Tracy the night before, and I was glad I had kept his trust. "Not to worry, Uncle Rupert. Your secret's safe with me."

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"Good." He sighed. "Safe. Don't know if I've ever felt safe, David."

I shifted the phone to my other hand and said, "Uncle Rupert, do you want to stay with us for a while, until you feel better?" After the words were out, I knew that if he said yes, my wife Tracy would be looking for the number of a good divorce lawyer in the Yellow Pages.

He laughed—which I thought was a good sign—and he said, "Your woman, nephew, didn't like me at your wedding those years back. I don't think she'd look too kindly on me sharing her bathroom. No, I'll be all right. It was good talking to you. And David?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for sticking with me. Thanks for believing me. And thanks for all those packages you bring."

I hung up the phone, thinking for a moment, let's do it. Let's go up and get him out of that house, and put him in a motel until he feels better. The hell with the money.

And I remembered those missed phone messages, those missed advertising pages, and knowing I had no stories for the next issue, I got out of the office and headed to the town hall for the selectmen's meeting.

A bad decision.

The selectmen's meeting was dull and when I left the smoky town hall—all three selectmen smoke and don't care who might be offended—my clothes reeked with stale tobacco and my notebook had four or five pages' worth of scribbled notes. The highlight of the evening had been the town road agent, who had stood before the board, denim cap in hand, and asked for more money in next year's budget for a new grader. The selectmen said they would think about it.

I'm a good writer and an even better reporter, but it would take much more than that to fill up next week's newspaper.

When I got home Tracy wasn't there, which made me glad, since I had so little to produce. As I unlocked the door and went into the kitchen, I was thinking that maybe if I was lucky (if such a word was appropriate) someone would get killed in a traffic accident overnight. That would be worth at least one good story, with photos and a sidebar if I was lucky.

Some luck.

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Taped to the refrigerator was a note:

Dave—

Have made good progress with Armco people. Looks like the ad deal is back on.

Sorry about the whole mess. How does a weekend in North Conway sound? Hot tubs and room service and we never have to leave the room (or bed!).

—Tracy

A knot of tension at the back of my neck that I had been ignoring all evening untwisted itself, and I felt a drink was in order. I threw my notebook on the kitchen counter and saw that the green light was blinking on the answering machine. Someone had called. I played back the message tape while rummaging around in the refrigerator for a beer, and I shut the refrigerator door at the first message.

Beep. "David, you there? Are you there? Can you pick up, it's your Uncle Rupert."

There came the whirring noise of the tape advancing, another *beep,* and: "David, I really need to talk to you. Something bad is going to happen. Something bad is going to happen."

I stood over the machine, as if I could stop it from producing any more messages, but there was this last one: "David, I need you. I need you really bad." And then his voice lowered to a whisper:

"They're here."

After getting no answer to my calls to Uncle Rupert's house, I drove up there. Part of me wasn't surprised to see the cruiser of Police Chief Amanda Craig in the driveway, along with the volunteer fire department ambulance. Their strobe lights were off and I knew from the way people were standing around that there was nothing much anyone could do except tidy up the scene.

Amanda held me tight with one arm as she explained what had happened. "Some kids going after raccoons went onto the property, back near that oak, David. They found your uncle hanging from a limb there. A ladder was propped up. It looks like suicide, David."

"Was there a note?" I managed to ask.

"No, no note," she said, and I only nodded, knowing I could not tell her what was on my mind.

Four volunteer firefighters, self-confident and swaggering a bit, came from around the house, carrying a stretcher. There was a

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blanket covering the body and the four men's faces suddenly became solemn. I knew what they were thinking: old crazy Rupert Gagnon finally lost it and hanged himself.

And a thought came. I hated myself for thinking it, but next week's newspaper was all set.

At the funeral home two days later, I insisted that Uncle Rupert be buried in his army colonel's uniform, even though the official records listed him as only a corporal and a cook. Tracy finally murmured something to the funeral director and he relented. And in violation of whatever now passed as journalistic standards, I worked out a deal with the post commander of the local American Legion, and in exchange for a future puff story on the Legion, Uncle Rupert was buried with a full honor guard.

On the afternoon of his funeral I returned to his home, but even with Uncle Rupert gone, Tracy could not bring herself to visit that old house, which was fine with me. There was something there for me alone.

It took awhile, but I found his .45 automatic, which I stashed under the front seat of the car. I found not one scrap of information about his army days, though. Nothing. Not a single note or photograph.

But I did find something that almost made me go back to the car and retrieve the pistol; for in his study, piled high with leather books, the dust had been disturbed on every single volume.

As if someone had searched every book, looking for something.

I stood on the rear porch, looking down at the oak tree. The ladder was now gone. In her police report, Amanda Craig had theorized that Uncle Rupert had climbed fifteen feet up the ladder, shimmied across a large branch of the oak, tied the rope to the branch, and then slung the noose over his head and allowed himself to fall.

I had left the office without talking to her. I don't think she would have believed me, but I was certain of one thing, as certain as I was that there was water in Lake Montcalm: Uncle Rupert hated heights. Hated them so much that he asked me to step on stools to retrieve cans and boxes from high shelves whenever I visited. Hated heights so much that not once had he ever climbed one of the mountains that surrounded Montcalm.

Again it was dusk and we were on the dock that went out onto the soft waters of Lake Montcalm. It was quiet and it seemed the loons

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had gone somewhere else, searching for God knows what. Tracy had made us both frozen strawberry daiquiris, and in watching her make the drinks, I felt better at seeing her throw only one shot of Jamaican rum into the blender. A small victory, but a nice one.

The cold drink had been sweet and sharp, and Tracy had talked to me as the night grew deeper, never once pressing me, never once prodding me. We sat on our lawn chairs like a couple of retirees ready to head south for the winter, and she stopped talking and then gently stroked my cheek.

"It's not been a good month or so for you, David, has it."

"Yeah, you can say that."

Her touch was tentative as a brief breeze. "At least, well, at least before he went, you found out more about him, David. You found out where he was and where he had been. I'm sure that's not much of a consolation, but it's something. You got your questions about Uncle Rupert answered."

Lord, so I had. "True, and I guess that's bothering me, too. I was his last relative, the last one he counted on, and I feel I failed him. I didn't protect him, Tracy. I let him go."

She rubbed the base of my neck. "Don't be hard on yourself, David. There was nothing more you could have done."

"I don't know about that," I said, and I sat there with my wife in silence, and thought, I'm the last one. I'm the only one who now knows his secrets.

I shivered, and remembering a lunchtime conversation with Uncle Rupert, I wondered about the properties of night-viewing glasses.

Three days after the funeral a package came to me at the *Gazette*'s offices. Inside the package was a thick manila envelope, sealed with tape, and there was a note on the outside in familiar handwriting:

> David—
>
> I feel they're getting closer, so I want this stuff in your hands. Here's my records on everything I did in the army. Ought to be hot stuff if you ever decided to publish it!
>
> I'll talk to you in a few days. I think. If anything happens to me, it was no accident. And be careful! You're being watched.
>
> —Uncle Rupert
>
> P.S. Remember what I said about my skull! Ha-ha!

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I almost smiled at the last sentence, for I had forgotten about Uncle Rupert's silver plate and his offer to me. But with the note and the package, I remembered something else. I left early and went home. I had other work to do.

Two days later I drove to Concord, the state capital, a drive that took about an hour and a half. A van followed me most of the way. I like to think I lost it when I took the exit from the highway into the city, but I'm not that confident of my abilities. I'm only a newspaperman, and there are times when I don't think I'm particularly good at that.

After doing some business in a local bank, I walked to the new federal building in Concord, which holds the U.S. Post Office and other federal agencies, and went upstairs to the third floor. A phone call the previous day had set up an appointment at this particular agency, and I waited patiently outside, wearing a suit and tie and carrying a black briefcase. A standard uniform for newspaper editors around most of the country, but one that would have brought some laughter and odd looks in Montcalm. There were weeks-old newsmagazines on the polished wood coffee tables which I ignored.

The man I was seeing opened his door promptly and invited me in, introducing himself as Special Agent something-or-other. I didn't care about his name. I only cared about his place of employment. He was a bit older than me but he had a cheery self-confidence that I gathered came from regular exercise and from carrying a gun.

He sat behind a wide wood desk that was so clean I was embarrassed at the memory of my own office, and he started talking as I opened the briefcase and interrupted, "Excuse me, but I'm afraid I misled you, Special Agent. I'm not here to see you about a story on drug trafficking in the north country. I'm here on something else."

The man's hair was brown and neatly trimmed, and he leaned back in his leather chair as I spoke. His chair didn't squeak. Typical government expertise.

"I'm here about my uncle. Rupert Gagnon. He died a few days ago. Apparent suicide."

"Yes?" he inquired, his voice noncommittal.

I placed the briefcase on my lap. "Uncle Rupert was a U.S. Army veteran. His records say he was a corporal, a mess-hall cook. Uncle Rupert had other memories. He told me he was a colonel, attached to a special unit that did covert work. About a month before he died, Uncle Rupert came to believe that he was being followed by people

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from the government, and also that his life was in danger because of the work he had done and the places he went."

"Mr. Conroy, I really don't—"

I took the manila envelope out and said, "Please, sir. Give me ninety more seconds and I'm out of here. I'm a newspaper editor, up in Montcalm. Publish a weekly paper. Uncle Rupert told me that he had evidence of what he did, what kind of missions he carried out. He implied that most of them were quite illegal, and would cause great harm and embarrassment if they ever became public. After he died, I went through his house and didn't find any information about his years in the service. Nothing at all. So I thought he had been fantasizing, until I got this in the mail the other day."

I passed over the sealed manila envelope with Uncle Rupert's letter taped to the outside, and I felt a twinge of sorrow at letting a stranger see Uncle Rupert's last words. He held it in his hands and placed it down on his clean desk and said, "Mr. Conroy, I really don't see the jurisdiction here—"

"But I believe it may be something," I said. "I haven't opened the envelope, and I brought it here. I thought there might be a chance, just a slight chance, that he was right. And if he was, and if he did have some sensitive information, I didn't think I should be the one to open it up. That's why I'm here."

The man behind the desk looked at me for what seemed a long time, and then he opened his desk drawer and brought out a silver letter-opener. He slit open the envelope and held it over his desk while a tumble of items fell out. Old photographs. Newspaper clippings. Some typewritten sheets of paper. He poked through the collection for a moment, and then without a word, passed over one of the clippings.

It was my wedding announcement, which ran in the *Union Leader* five years back. The FBI man gave me another clipping. It was a pound cake recipe from a 1964 issue of the *Boston Globe*. I reached over and picked up one of the typewritten pieces of paper. It was a smudged carbon of a letter that my uncle had written to President Johnson in 1967, asking him to spend more money on UFO research.

The special agent cleared his throat. "It would seem, ah, well, Mr. Conroy . . ."

I nodded, trying not to cry. "It would seem that my uncle was operating under some delusions."

"That seems to be a fair statement."

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I snapped my briefcase shut and as I got up to leave, I said, "If my uncle really was being followed by people from the government, then please tell them what I've brought you here today. Is that all right? I'm sure they'd like to know what he was hiding."

The special agent said, "I have no idea what you are talking about," but he didn't offer the envelope or its contents back as I left.

Months have gone by, and the odd photographers and the nondescript vans have disappeared from Montcalm. Every now and then, I visit Uncle Rupert's grave, and the grass has grown back over the disturbed soil. The gravestone says that he was a colonel, U.S. Army, retired, and though I know my insistence on having those letters cut into the stone caused a lot of gossip in town about my lack of sanity, I still have a faint stirring of pride each time I visit his grave. He would have smiled, I thought, over having this recognition, at least, of what he did.

But there was more I would do.

Yesterday I drove back to Concord, back to the bank I visited so many weeks ago, with a safe-deposit key in hand, and I brought back the envelope that Uncle Rupert mailed me before his death. The real one, of course, since the FBI man received some old rubbish from Uncle Rupert's house that I had earlier gathered up. I have just finished laying out the pages for tomorrow's newspaper, with the old documents, the old photos, and the old and still-bloody stories, and not trusting anyone, I have made a couple of phone calls to some acquaintances of mine: a correspondent for the Associated Press; a writer for the state paper, the *Union Leader;* and a stringer for the *Boston Globe*.

I've invited them to stop by the office before the paper goes to press. I think Uncle Rupert would have been proud.

Like he said, some wars just keep on going.

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A playwright from Montgomery, Alabama, Jimmy Vines moved to New York City three years ago and went to work as an assistant to an established literary agent, leaving only recently to found his own agency. Business appears not to interfere with his creative output, for Mr. Vines has two Off-Off-Broadway plays to his credit, a recurring column in New York Newsday, *and several previous short-story publications. We welcome him to* EQMM *with a story every cat lover will appreciate. . . .*

BETWEEN A CAT AND A HARD PLACE

by JIMMY VINES

This morning, as every morning, Charlie Wainwright woke up sneezing. His swollen and irritated eyes felt like lumps of wet sand that were beginning to dry and harden around the edges. At breakfast he rubbed his itching arms and neck, and tried to taste his Cheerios.

"Now don't forget," his wife Gerta said impatiently, "today's Thursday, time for Slyboots's weekly checkup!"

She kissed the big cat's mouth, then wiped lipstick off its furry chin. "That's right, Slyboots," she said lovingly, "you're going to see nice Dr. Feemer today!" Gerta was a heavy woman of fifty-eight in a blue dress that was too tight in the bosom and too loose everywhere else. She poured the cat out of her arms gently and it nuzzled her puffy ankles. "The appointment's at one o'clock. Don't be late. I will call the vet to make sure you've been there!"

Charlie started to mumble the obligatory, "Yes, dear," around a mouthful of cereal, but a sneeze took the words and sprayed them across the table as globs of mash and milk.

Gerta slammed the door and waddled up the driveway to her car. She had a very busy schedule, forever hurrying between church functions, the bridge club, and local cultural events, so Charlie was

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always left to take care of her adorable little Slyboots.

The instant Gerta backed her car into the road, Charlie hurled his spoon at the cat. His aim was bad: the spoon whacked the refrigerator. Slyboots scurried away before Charlie could throw anything else. The cat might just as well have walked slowly—because for a whole minute Charlie was immobilized by a harsh sneezing fit.

Charlie was sixty-nine, and he'd had two heart attacks in recent years. A specialist had warned that a third heart attack or even a stroke was very likely, so Charlie took it easy and stayed on his diet and medication. Until fourteen months ago, in spite of his heart problem, things were going fine for Charlie; he'd planned on living a long, quiet life.

The turning point came that fine spring day Gerta brought the cat home. Charlie hadn't objected at first, because he didn't think he was allergic to cats. Since he'd never owned a cat, and since friends' cats didn't bother him, the possibility of a latent allergy never crossed his mind. Yet as it happened, something about this cat made Charlie sneeze ceaselessly.

And the sneezing hadn't started the first day; it was only after a couple of weeks, once the house was thoroughly permeated with shedded cat hairs, that Charlie's sinuses awoke and began giving him fits. But by that time Gerta was so attached to her pet that she wouldn't give it up.

Charlie's specialist told him sneezing was bad on the heart, but Charlie already knew that. He felt his heart stammer every time he had a sneezing bout.

Reasoning with Gerta proved futile. She refused to believe that her dear, darling little Slyboots was to blame for Charlie's suffering. She blamed the sneezing on everything else: dust, pollen, the spray deodorant that he used. Gerta would not be coerced into giving the cat away.

But Charlie, out of extreme discomfort and fear for his weak heart, decided to take control of the situation. The cat had to go! One afternoon, after an especially tiresome and fruitless argument about the cat, Gerta left the house to attend one of her various social functions. She'd be gone a few hours, Charlie knew. He put Slyboots outdoors. There was plenty of time for the cat to wander off and never be heard from again. Charlie waited. And waited. And much to his chagrin, the fat feline stayed on the porch, howling the whole time. That evening, when Gerta's car bounced up the driveway,

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Charlie quickly let the cat back inside before his wife found out what he'd done.

About a week later, after another lost battle of words, when Gerta left the house, Charlie drove the cat to the outskirts of the neighborhood and remorselessly let it out of his car by a thick wooded lot. That night he told Gerta that when he was taking out the trash, Slyboots had slipped past him. He said he'd chased the cat across three neighbors' yards but that Slyboots was just too fast for him, what with his weak heart and all. Gerta scoffed at the story. She accused Charlie of being responsible for the cat's disappearance, and Charlie vehemently denied it. But the crowning hideous thing happened later in a dark hour past midnight: just like one of those famous pets in *Readers Digest,* the cat somehow found its way home and woke a teary-eyed Gerta with its wailing at the back door.

Now the possibility that the cat might "run away" was exhausted. After all, what's better proof of a pet's loyalty than its return after a twelve-hour absence? Suddenly Charlie was faced with the one alternative by which to restore an equilibrium to his life: he had to kill the cat. The way Charlie saw it, if he didn't kill the cat, the cat would kill him.

Taking a cat's life should be simple. But to keep Gerta from divorcing him, and to avoid a lawsuit from the Animal Rights people, Charlie had to make the little murder look as though his furry tormentor died of natural causes. He couldn't leave a mangled corpse. He had to do this carefully.

At ten o'clock one morning, about to take a shower, Charlie reached inside the linen closet for a big fluffy towel. He hadn't seen the cat since breakfast, and in the meantime his sneezing and itching had subsided a little.

Charlie took a towel and started to close the folding doors when a red-brown blur sprang from the shadowy depths of the closet with a *Yowwwwl,* swiping Charlie's arm loathsomely and scampering away.

"Goddamnit!" Charlie bellowed. The cat disappeared down the hallway with a twitch of its tail. Charlie shook all over, realizing his towel was contaminated with cat hair. He flung the towel down to the floor and kicked it after the cat.

Control, he reminded himself. Must keep control. His heart lost its rhythm, and he leaned against the closet doors until danger passed.

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Suppressing rage, Charlie grabbed a towel down deep in the stack, one that the cat couldn't possibly have touched. He sneezed violently, and had to pause for a long ten-count before proceeding to the shower.

Over the months, Charlie had thought of many different ways of killing the cat that would position him so that his own innocence could not be doubted. All the methods he devised, except one, were slightly flawed for one reason or another. The plan that he'd finally settled on seemed perfect, and he was now ready to carry it out.

Today was the day.

His plan involved the veterinarian, Nathan Feemer.

The veterinarian was an old family friend. His private office was a small cedar-paneled room with potted plants in the windows and bright prints of well-bred dogs on the walls. With the door closed, the din of the animals in the kennel across the hall quieted to muffled background noise. Behind the desk sat Dr. Nathan Feemer, a solidly built man of sixty, writing something in a file.

"Well, Charlie! I'm happy to say that Slyboots is in tiptop shape. Really," he chuckled, "you ought to tell Gerta that weekly checkups aren't necessary. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to turn away business—but once every two months would be more than ample."

Charlie glanced down at the Kitty Kondo which housed Slyboots. He wiped his nose with a handkerchief which he replaced in the pocket of his rumpled brown sportscoat. His silver hair hung limply over his forehead, dangling in his bloodshot eyes. He looked miserable.

Dr. Feemer closed his file and smiled at Charlie.

Charlie squirmed. It suddenly seemed impossible. How could he tell his friend the vet, a man whose life's work was healing pets, that this cat must die? He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

"I'll bill you as usual," the vet said, blinking slowly behind his thick glasses.

Last week when Charlie had taken the cat for its checkup he wanted to explain the situation and reveal his plan. But instead, he'd stalled and pushed his thoughts to the back of his mind until he was out the door, hating his silence.

Now Charlie drew a breath, gathered his resolve. "I have a problem, Nate. And you're the only one I can turn to," he said. "I mean, this falls in your field of expertise."

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The vet rubbed his chin, waited for Charlie to continue. His eyes registered puzzlement, with a hint of intrigue.

Charlie plucked at the hairs on the back of his hand and then blurted: "I've got to—"

The vet's eyes narrowed.

"*I've got to kill my wife's cat!*" He saw that his fists were clenched.

The vet was taken by surprise. "What did you say?"

"I'VE GOT TO KILL MY WIFE'S CAT!"

Nate seemed flustered. "*Kill* the—?" His eyes ticked about the room. "Whatever for? Why—why would anyone want to kill a dear pet?"

"Dear pet!" Charlie pulled out his handkerchief just in time, and sneezed into it. His face crimsoned; he felt hot all over. Irritably swiping cat hair from his lapels, he stood up and began pacing—and the whole story tumbled out.

Afterwards, in the silence that followed, Charlie groped for his chair and sat, a bewildered expression on his face, as if he'd just woken from a nap and didn't know quite where he was.

The vet cleared his throat and took a moment, and when he spoke it was with studied patience, as if he were explaining the game of Tic-Tac-Toe to an imbecile. "I can't just haul Slyboots into the operating room and make a mistake for you. It would jeopardize my whole practice."

"I wasn't suggesting that *you* kill him, Nate!"

"I'm sorry, I won't offer any advice on how to kill him either."

"I've thought it all out," Charlie said. "I've looked at it from every angle!" Charlie shoved the plastic Kitty Kondo with his foot. His voice dropped to nearly a whisper. "I can't shoot the cat—how would I explain the bloody little corpse? And besides, the bang of the pistol, even if I was prepared for it, might be too much for my heart. Can't poison his food because Gerta opens a fresh can of cat food for each of his meals. Strangling is no good because I'd get clawed and bitten, and might end up breaking his furry neck."

There was a pause. Slyboots scratched at the walls of his Kitty Kondo.

"You're my only hope." Charlie's hands fluttered helplessly. "You put animals to sleep all the time. You do it by injection, don't you?"

"I've already said I won't be party to this."

Charlie smacked his thigh once, hard. "*Don't you give a cat an injection to put it to sleep?*"

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"Yes!" Now the vet's hands were fluttering. "But that is irrelevant because I'll not—"

"Give me a hypodermic!" Charlie was wild-eyed. "I'll do it myself, at home!"

The doctor stood abruptly. "Good day, Charles." He pointed to the door.

"Please! I'll pay you! I'll—"

"I said, good day!"

The office door opened, and a pretty young red-haired nurse leaned in. "The O.R.'s ready, Doctor."

Nathan Feemer's frosty eyes thawed at the sight of the young nurse.

Charlie noticed this, and then he listened closely for subtle nuances in the doctor's vocal tones.

"Yes, Suzanne," Feemer said, "I—I'll be with you in a moment." She withdrew, closing the door quietly. A fresh tantalizing trace of perfume lingered in the office. The veterinarian stared at the door, seemingly lost in thought, his eyes blank blue orbs.

Charlie swiveled in his chair. He made some quick calculations, and what he calculated made his blood run hot. He'd thought his old friend would understand and help him. But now he saw that Nate would have to be forced. In past visits Charlie noticed the intimacy with which Nate and his nurse spoke; but now, with the scent of her perfume fresh in his nostrils, Charlie was ready to explore the issue. It was Charlie's reserve ammunition, his last resort.

He stretched out, propping his feet on the Kitty Kondo, as if to stay awhile longer. Looking at his friend Nathan Feemer, he cackled.

The glassy look in the vet's eyes shattered.

Charlie then dealt his trump card, the one he'd held so close to his vest until just the right moment. He accused Nathan Feemer of marital infidelity.

Feemer was thrown. His chin jiggled as he blubbered a flimsy denial. The vet marched around his desk, jaw clenched. He jerked the door open and demanded that Charlie leave.

But like a swordsman who has disarmed his opponent and sent him sprawling on the flagstones, Charlie chuckled victoriously. Riding a swell of bravado, the same feeling that drives a swaggering swordsman to tickle the fallen man's throat with the blade until a trace of blood seeps forth, Charlie made it clear that he was not

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above planting seeds of evidence that would arouse a wife's suspicions.

At that moment the men were interrupted: the nurse's voice, light and pure-sounding, floated down the hall. "You coming, Nate?"

Nate whined, *whined,* down deep in his throat; checked himself. "Yes, yes, Nurse Summerton," he said. His voice was too even. "Just a moment." He shut the door and thrust fists in his pockets. "What do you want from me?"

"I already told you, Nate. A hypo. Simple little hypo. I know you've got one around here somewhere." Charlie pitched forward and sneezed.

Dr. Feemer turned to the wall, and then to Charlie, and then turned away again. He was quietly livid. "You don't honestly think I can be bribed."

YES! Charlie wanted to say, but he did not. What he said, after pursing his lips thoughtfully, was: *"Bribed?* A bad word choice, Nate. That cancels any doubts I might have had about your illicit little tête-à-tête with Nurse—Summerton, is it? Now, I'll have that hypo."

"This is criminal!"

Charlie smiled up at the veterinarian, and snuffled. "Since when is killing a cat against the law?" He rubbed his watery eyes.

The doctor paced a moment. He looked at Charlie; looked at the door. His shoulders drooped defeatedly. Then he took a key from his desk drawer. Pulling on his white lab coat, he mumbled, "Wait here."

When the vet returned to the office, Charlie was scratching under his collar, but he was a happy man. The vet produced a small clear hypodermic from a big pocket in his lab coat. "Won't she get another cat, Charlie? To replace the first?"

"No, I've already figured that out." Charlie's red-rimmed eyes sparkled when he spoke. His voice trembled enthusiastically. "I'll remind her psychologists say it's very unhealthy to get a pet that's even remotely similar to a recently deceased pet. We'll get a canary or something. A goldfish. I don't know. But we won't have a cat!"

Feemer held the syringe up to the light and looked through it. A protective plastic cap sheathed the needle. "You've obviously thought this through in every detail."

"Oh yes. Yes." Charlie Wainwright's face was that of a child's sitting on Santa's lap the day before Christmas. "I know what I want. Give me the needle."

"You didn't get this from me. I'll deny it to my last gasp."

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"I know! I know!"

The vet was tense and pale. "Sodium pentobarbital. The best place to inject is in the abdomen, and deep. Too shallow and you put the poison in the fatty areas around its stomach. Takes longer to work that way—a minute or so. Push the needle to the hilt and it'll take just seconds."

"Okay. Okay," Charlie said, pocketing the hypo.

"And don't uncap the needle until you're ready to use it. You don't want to stick yourself, you know."

"Righto," Charlie said, grabbing the handle of the Kitty Kondo and heading for the door. Slyboots growled.

"Er—one more thing, Charlie," the doctor said shamefacedly, wringing his hands. "Is it—are we, Suzanne and I—really that obvious?"

"The secret is safe with me," Charlie said with a wink.

That night Charlie was in his favorite chair, a brown vinyl recliner to which cat hair would not cling, when Gerta came in the front door after an evening at the theater. She wore a maroon felt hat with a gigantic brim, a dark velvety dress, ropes of fake pearls, and an antique fox stole. She chattered noisily as she crossed the room. "The play was an *abomination*, Charles. Really, you should have seen it. When the poor dreadful actors weren't dropping props they were dropping lines. You ever heard anybody improvise Shakespeare?"

"Glad you had a nice time, dear," Charlie said behind his newspaper.

The cat ambled into the den from some other part of the house, fat and slow. It crossed between Gerta's ankles, rubbing against her vein-corded legs, shedding reddish brown hairs on her white stockings.

How hard it had been for Charlie not to launch the cat into eternity before Gerta got home! But if she'd come home to find the cat dead, no amount of feigned sorrow on Charlie's part would have been enough to fully convince her that he hadn't played a part in the cat's untimely demise. He'd stretched his willpower to the limit, reminding himself that it would be only a few hours. He would do the deed while Gerta—and supposedly he—was asleep.

"*Othello* was a torture! They had a Chinese woman playing the title part, of all things. Have you ever heard of such?" She flung her big hat and tiny clasp purse on the couch. "That's right, Slyboots."

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Charlie grimaced at the sound of the cat's name.

Gerta buried her face in the cat's long red fur, and went to the kitchen. "Let's get you something to eat, and then you and Mommy are going beddiebye. I'll give you your dinner in bed. You like that, don't you, Slyboots? Hm?"

Charlie could picture the cat licking one of Gerta's many chins. And even as the thought came to him, he heard Gerta giggle.

"Stop that, Sly. You know I'm ticklish!"

A minute later, Gerta came through the den with an open can of cat food and a spoon. Slyboots, in her arms, batted at the nose of the dead fox that hung around Gerta's neck. "You coming with us?" Gerta asked her husband.

"In a little while, sweets," he said, reaching out and patting the cat between the ears.

"Come on, Sly," Gerta crooned, going down the hallway. "We'll have dinner and then you and Mommy will snuggle up and go to sleep . . ."

Charlie waited until her voice died away before he allowed himself to sneeze. He sneezed three times, each more explosive than the last. After it was over, he wiped his runny eyes and nose, and sat still as his heart whacked against his ribs. Willing himself to relax, he closed his eyes until his heart slowed to its normal pace.

Everything was perfect. He'd shown no antagonism toward the shedding red beast; he'd even been kind to it. He was sure Gerta noticed the gentle pat, and would remember it. This was just the position he wanted to be in before the cat's stiffening body was found in the morning.

Earlier today he'd taken a pair of gardening gloves from the tool room and stowed them in the very back of the linen closet, under plenty of towels. The gloves would afford protection from getting scratched in the process of plunging the needle into the cat. He didn't want to have to explain scratches in the morning.

Three hours passed. It usually took Gerta a long time to fall asleep. Charlie couldn't concentrate on the newspaper, but he dared not turn on the television. He didn't want the noise to bother Gerta or the cat and keep either from sleeping. He read the same comics page again and again, not taking in a word of it, not cracking a smile.

At two A.M. he rose slowly from the chair. His heart skipped along at a rather fast rate, but he didn't let it upset him. He simply stood

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in place until it slowed a fraction. Then he stepped into the dark hall and opened the doors of the linen closet.

Gloves on, hypodermic in hand, he advanced to the bedroom door. It was open, and the room was very dark. He let his eyes adjust. Blue moonlight through the gauzy drapes gave the room an otherworldly glow. Charlie stood at the foot of the bed looking at his wife, who was rolled into a comfortable ball on one side of the bed. Beside her, on the nightstand, Charlie saw the half-finished can of cat food which, as always, would be scraped down the garbage disposal in the morning. Under her arms, a lumpy form. The cat? How could he inject the cat if it was wrapped so intimately against its mother's bosom?

But on closer examination Charlie saw that Gerta was not holding the cat. It was a pillow she was suffocating in her sleep. Charlie moved around the foot of the bed, his eyes wide in search of the cat.

There, on a chair next to the bed, not a yard from the opened can of cat food, Charlie's eyes found the form they sought. The creature had assumed the pose of its mother, head tucked down, front legs wrapped under its chin, deep in a world of dreams.

Charlie's heart flopped and hung quiet for an instant too long. He shut his eyes and stood perfectly still until the moment passed. When he opened his eyes again, he checked Gerta; she was still in a knot on the bed. His victim hadn't moved either.

He went across the floor on his knees. The carpet whispered beneath him. For fear of waking the beast, he breathed shallowly. In one practiced motion he took the cap off the needle and placed it between his teeth. Now at the chair, he leaned in.

But Charlie recoiled suddenly, his back high, straight. He was going to sneeze. His free hand covered his nose, pinched it tight. The glove leather tickled his nostrils and he sneezed silently, keeping the sound deep inside his chest. Once. Twice. The needle shook in the moonlight. Had Gerta moved? Not an inch. The cat? Quiet as ever. Relieved, Charlie dropped his shoulders and hesitated, listening to his heart until it was regular, before leaning over the chair again.

Swiftly, surprising himself, Charlie clamped his hand over the cat's head to keep the mouth from opening with a screech as the hand with the needle swept into the beast from underneath—careful to avoid pinning the seat cushion by mistake—and pressed the plunger home. He shivered at the crucial moment, but he would not let himself be betrayed by his own body. He held the needle in place

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until he was calm again—had the cat kicked?—and froze for two minutes. Removing the drained hypo, he stood, a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead.

He backed away, glancing over his shoulder, careful not to bump into anything on his way out. Then he turned out of the room and walked down the hall, capping the needle with a trembling hand. Victory!

Charlie replaced the leather gloves in the linen closet for removal tomorrow, and went to the kitchen. In the trash can under the sink was the cardboard milk carton he'd emptied and placed there early in the evening. He dropped the syringe in the carton and closed the mouth of it. Rooting down into the mess of egg shells, coffee grinds, and cat food cans, Charlie interred the milk carton with its hidden evidence. He washed his hands under the faucet and dried them on the handtowel, making sure he left no bits of debris on the towel.

He stood at the counter awhile, quivering with an overwhelming happiness. The oven clock ticked in rhythm with his heartbeat. Though his heart had been through some terrible strains that night, Charlie wasn't going to take any more of his pills. He'd already had the prescribed daily dose, and besides, now that his work was accomplished, wouldn't he go to bed with a light heart? He already felt better than he had in a long, long time.

He took several deep relaxing breaths, and drank a glass of water. Then he went to the den and flopped down in his favorite chair to read the comics. He was sure they'd be funny this time. He'd enjoy himself a little before going to bed.

Charlie shook the paper to straighten it, and beamed at the antics of the cartoon characters. Where did those guys get their ideas? He laughed out loud, and then reminded himself to stay quiet. He'd go to bed soon.

And then suddenly the bottom edge of the newspaper crinkled, and a furry red form sprang into Charlie's lap. The cat! For a full four seconds he stared with horror and disbelief at the beast as it walked in circles looking for a place to sit. Charlie started to sneeze, but instead—he screamed.

The next day, as Gerta made her way through the group of mourners who'd assembled themselves in her living room, one of the ladies from church, a tiny twig of a woman, took Gerta aside to give her personal regards. She said how sorry she was that Charlie's heart

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gave out on him so suddenly, and how good Gerta looked in spite of everything.

Gerta smiled sadly, and hugged her cat Slyboots closer. "Yes," she said, "Charlie was a dear heart. We sure will miss him."

The twig woman commented on Gerta's fox stole, and wondered aloud why people didn't wear them much anymore.

Gerta said they were coming back in style, you just watch and see. Then, fingering the fox fur absently, she withdrew her hand and said, "Ugh! Looks like I've got to get this thing cleaned. Somehow the fur's gotten all damp and sticky!"

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